

Choices

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Choices

by [MesserMoon](#)

Summary

People make mistakes, but they also make choices. It's important to James, that difference. He does his best not to confuse the two.

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Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

People make mistakes. Most of the time, James thinks, you should forgive them. If they're sorry. If they mean it. He himself has made some questionable decisions in his life. Some missteps. Everyone is just trying their best.

People make mistakes.

But they also make choices. It's important to him, that difference. He does his best not to confuse the two.

The night that Sirius shows up on James's doorstep he's barely able to stand. He has his wand. That's all. He's not even wearing shoes.

"Didn't have time," he tells James, words slightly slurred. Sirius smiles when he says it, but the expression doesn't reach his eyes—cracking at the corners of his mouth. Before that night, James had never fully understood what it meant to want someone dead. But he could have killed them. All of them. Anyone who had ever touched Sirius.

"Bit predictable aren't they?" he finds himself saying as he slips a gentle arm around his friend and starts leading him inside.

"What, shoes you mean?"

"Well yeah, everyone wears them don't they? Where's the fucking spontaneity? I look down and I know exactly what I'm gonna get."

"Shoes."

"Exactly!"

Sirius's smile is a bit more genuine this time, though James can feel him trembling under his hands.

"Fucking fascists," Sirius mutters, just as James's mother comes down the stairs, wand lit, feet slippered.

"James, what—oh," she stops there, halfway down the steps, and for a moment something painful flickers across her face. But then it's gone. "Sirius, love, it's good to see you—James, the den please."

James nods, slowly walking himself and Sirius towards the sofa. Sirius's breath is laboured and every once and a while James feels him suppress a wince.

“Sorry about just turning up,” he says, his voice strained as James lowers him onto the sofa.

“Don’t be daft,” he sits beside him, hand still on his arm, unwilling to let him go.

“You’re always welcome, you know that,” Mrs. Potter comes into the room behind them, a cup of hot tea floating beside her. She levitates it gently onto the coffee table. “Milk, four sugars,” she says, making Sirius grin.

“You remembered.”

“Hard to forget a bloody toothache in a mug,” that earns James a pointed stare from his mother but Sirius only laughs, head resting on the back of the sofa like he hasn’t got the energy to hold it up.

“What can I say, I like ‘em sweet,” he winks at James, who grins in return. Sirius would flirt with a lamppost if he was bored enough. Or scared. Sirius wraps charm around himself like armour.

Euphemia kneels in front of him, her hand reaching out to gently cup his cheek. Sirius is pale, even in the dark James can see that, can see the circles under his eyes and the blooming purple bruise on the side of his jaw. If her frown is anything to go by, James would guess his mother sees it too.

“I’m going to cast a diagnostic spell love,” she says softly, thumb grazing his cheek. “Is that alright?” There’s a pause, a slight tightening at the corners of Sirius’s eyes, never one to relish letting people in. Eventually, he nods.

Euphemia takes a deep breath before pulling her hand away and beginning to cast silently. James can feel her magic—warm and sweet, like cinnamon. Sirius’s eyes flutter closed, arm going stiff under James’s hand so he gives it a squeeze. *I’m here*, he hopes it says. *I’m here*. *I’m here*. After a few seconds Sirius squeezes back.

Euphemia’s wand drops into her lap but she waits for Sirius’s eyes to open before she speaks, teeth nervously biting into her lower lip.

“I’m just going to mend your ribs and ankle, okay? There shouldn’t be any lingering soreness, but if there is you let me know.”

“What?” James’s stomach clenches. The rage, when it comes, is a wave so high he can’t see over the top of it. He drowns in it. “Your ribs? They broke your fucking ribs?”

“*James*,” his mother chastises. But he can’t. It’s too much. It’s too fucking much.

“If it makes you feel better, I don’t think they’re actually broken,” Sirius shifts his position and barely holds back a groan. “More like...slightly cracked. Isn’t that right Effie?” He offers her a smile and she huffs out a breath in return.

“I’m going to need you to hold still,” is all she says, he nods again. This time, when the spells are cast, Sirius’s control slips, small grunts of pain forcing themselves out of his mouth as his bones knit themselves back together. James wants to scream.

“There we go,” his mother says softly, pushing the fringe back off of Sirius’s forehead. “All done now.”

Sirius nods, eyes closed again as he slowly sinks down onto the sofa. James moves so he can stretch out his legs.

“Sorry...bit tired...thanks though. Thought I was gonna have to go to Mungo’s. Worried they would...come...get me.”

Even in the dark James can see his mother holding back tears. “No,” she says weakly, “no one’s going to get you Sirius.”

“Mmm,” is all he replies, already half asleep.

The two Potters stand frozen for a moment, silent in their darkened home, brimming with feelings that ache.

“James, will you—“

He cuts her off with a nod, going quickly to the cupboard in the hallway and getting the spare blankets and pillows.

“Go to sleep mum,” he says softly, as he comes back into the room. “I’ll stay with him.” He drapes the blankets over Sirius’s body, gently slipping a pillow under his head.

“You’re sure?” she asks.

James turns back to her, offering what he hopes is a reassuring smile. “Yeah, ‘course.” It’s not as though he’s going to be able to sleep now anyway, and there’s no way in hell he’s letting Sirius out of his sight.

She nods, eyes still on Sirius even as she pulls James close and kisses the top of his head.

“Hey mum?” he catches her before she leaves the room, still whispering. “Thanks,” he says lamely, causing his mother’s brows to draw together. “Thank you for...” he doesn’t know how to put it into words, how to say how grateful he is to his parents for loving Sirius, for seeing how desperately he needs them to. *Deserves* for them to. James gestures vaguely at the sleeping boy on the sofa. “Just thanks.”

“I love you,” she says after a brief pause, voice thin and far too sad for James’s liking.

“Love you too,” and then, almost in the same breath: “I’m not going to let him go back there.” Because it needs to be said. Because he should have said it ages ago.

She nods slowly. “I know.”

But he shakes his head. “No, I mean, not just right now. Not just this summer. I’m *never* letting him go back there. To them.”

“Yes,” a sad sort of smile finds its way into the corner of her mouth. “I know.” And then her expression shifts, as though suddenly remembering something: “Regulus,” the name comes out as a breath.

James blinks, thrown by the sudden change in subject. “What about him?” he doesn’t mean it to sound as cold as it does.

His mother runs a hand over her face, looking tired. “We can’t leave him there—I’ll talk to Albus, see if I can—“

“No, mum,” James glances quickly down at Sirius to make sure he’s still asleep. “Regulus isn’t like Sirius. He’s—I don’t know—he’s one of them.”

“He’s a child James.”

“Pfft,” he knocks her words aside. “Not hardly, we’re practically the same age.”

She smiles a bit at that. “Yes. Exactly.” James scowls.

“He doesn’t want to leave,” he presses on. “He likes it there, likes all that pureblood garbage. I’m not having him in my house—not having him around Sirius.”

She arches her brow. “Oh, it’s your house is it?”

James’s cheeks flush but he doesn’t backdown, arms crossing over his chest as he holds her gaze. “I’m not having him near Sirius,” he repeats.

A few moments of tense silence pass before Euphemia rolls her eyes, letting out a long suffering sigh. “I’m writing Albus in the morning.”

“Mum—“

Her hand snaps up to stop him, a clear warning sign. Mrs. Potter is not a woman you want to cross and James’s protest is effectively shoved back down his throat.

“I won’t leave a child in that household James, not if I can help it, so I don’t really care what you think of him. Am I clear?”

Grudgingly, James nods his head.

“Excellent. Goodnight then.”

He doesn’t reply, sulkily sliding down onto the floor, pressing his back into the sofa.

People make mistakes. But this? His friend showing up broken and shivering in the middle of the night? This is not a mistake. As far as James is concerned the Blacks have made a choice, Regulus included. And it is unforgivable.

It's brilliant, having Sirius stay all summer. Not worrying about running out of time, not seeing that look in his eyes as the days count down. Sure, there are still moments when he... drifts. To places that James can't quite get to. But on the whole, it's better.

He speaks about what happened in bits and pieces, like he can't handle it all at once. First to James's mum and dad and then, when they come, to Professor Dumbledore and Alastor Moody.

"They told me to take the mark," Sirius explains, always in the same dead voice. Just once more, they keep saying, just a few more details. "I told them to fuck off. You can imagine how well that went over."

James never pushes Sirius for more. He watches the adults around them take from Sirius without even realizing it, even his mum and dad, so focused on the bigger picture. The politics. The war. They never notice how their questions strip him bare. How little is holding Sirius together—probably because he snarks his way through it, throwing out one-liners like it's his own personal one man show. It's only James who notices how his hands shake. Or the muffliato charm he throws over his bedroom at night.

But mostly—mostly the summer is good. Bright and warm—they play quidditch nearly everyday, twirling around one another in the yard, diving for snitches that aren't there just to see if the other will follow, tugging on broom ends and knocking bludgers about.

Dumbledore comes and goes and there is no more talk of Regulus. At least not that James hears. He's glad. That's the last thing Sirius needs.

"You will try to behave won't you?" Euphemia asks, as they face her on platform 9 3/4, the train thrumming behind them.

"Try?" Sirius says lightly, grinning as Mrs. Potter places a kiss on the top of his head. "Certainly we can try."

"Love a good try, I do," James agrees, as he receives his own kiss.

His mother rolls her eyes, elbowing her husband as he attempts to choke back a laugh. "I pity Minerva," Fleamont manages to wheeze.

James scrunches his nose. "Don't know why, if anything you should pity me the amount of homework that woman gives out."

"James," his mother says pointedly.

"Yes Jamie, that was terribly rude. Everyone knows she goes by feline."

"Sirius!"

James chortles. "Cat on her bad days."

"Kitty on her very bad days."

“SIRIUS.”

“Oh, what’s that—I think we better go, don’t want to miss the train,” Sirius tugs on James who is bent over in a fit of laughter.

“I mean it you two!” Euphemia calls after them, not sounding nearly as cross as she probably means to. “Behave—and be careful!”

James waves to his mother before being dragged onto the train by Sirius, both of them still half in hysterics.

“*Kitty*,” James is still muttering to himself as they push along the train in search of the others. It doesn’t take them long to find them. It never does, even without the map. James has always felt there was an almost electric pull between the four of them. Sometimes he swears he can feel them tugging at him, like strings wrapped around his ribs. He could find them anywhere.

“Hello boys!” Sirius grins as he throws open the compartment door with a bang, nearly causing Remus to fall off his seat.

“You can never just walk into a room can you?” he grumbles, righting himself. “Always got to announce yourself like the bloody Queen.”

“Ah, but Moony,” Sirius drops into the seat next to him, invading his personal space. “I am the Queen.”

James watches Remus struggle to keep a straight face. “Are you now?”

Sirius nods gravely. “I can tell you don’t believe me, but answer me this—have you ever seen us both in the same place at the same time?”

That’s enough to have James giggling again, Peter snorting so hard he nearly chokes.

“You’re a menace you know that?” Remus shoots at Sirius before returning to his book, unable to keep the fondness out of his voice.

“It’s all for you, my love.”

James thinks, for a moment, that he sees blush blooming across Remus’s cheeks, but there isn’t much time to ponder the reason why before the carriage door is being thrown open again.

“Bloody genetic,” Remus mutters under his breath, the four of them staring up at their new arrival.

Regulus Black stops dead in his tracks, seemingly just as surprised to see them as they are to see him.

“Sorry,” he says, eyes meeting Sirius’s and then instantly going blank, like a wall has come down, “thought it was empty.”

“Couldn’t you hear us?” Peter asks, sounding genuinely curious.

“No.”

His eyes are still on Sirius and it’s making James’s skin itch. They look similar—same dark curls and grey eyes. Sirius is taller, broader across the chest and shoulders—a beater’s build. Regulus is...well...there’s no other word for it...*pretty*. He looks like one of the cherubs in a renaissance painting, just with more scowling.

“Can we help you with something?” James hears himself say before deciding to speak.

Regulus starts like he’d forgotten the rest of them were there, blinking a few times before dropping Sirius’s gaze.

“No,” he says again, his favourite word apparently.

“Brilliant,” James claps his hands together. “Guess you’ll be off then, won’t you?”

But he doesn’t move, just keeps standing there, a weird tension on his face, jaw clenching and unclenching. The awkward silence stretches on infinitely too long as far as James is concerned.

Eventually, Regulus pulls his eyes up again, looking determinedly at his brother. “You alright?”

Sirius goes stiff, even from the other side of the compartment James can see it—the flexing in his arms, the rising of his shoulders. When he’s around his family James hardly recognizes him, all the light that pours out of Sirius on a nearly constant basis seems to dry right up. They’re a bunch of bloody dementors, the Blacks are.

“Alright?” Peter asks confused, eyes darting back and forth between the two brothers. “Why wouldn’t he be alright?”

No one answers him. Remus, who must be nearly as confused, has closed the book in his lap, eyes brimming with concern as he watches Sirius like there’s no one else in the room.

“Yeah,” Sirius says finally. “Sure Reg, I’m fine.”

James can feel it again, the rage that welled inside him the night Sirius showed up, broken and bloody and hurting.

“You done now?” he snaps, when Regulus continues to just stand there.

“This is none of your business,” Regulus snipes back, and *oh boy* that about does it. James can practically feel the magic buzzing under his skin as his hands curl into fists.

“The hell it isn’t. You think you can just waltz in here like everything’s fine? Like you lot didn’t beat the shit out of him—“

“What?” Peter squawks, but James is barely paying attention, his eyes burning holes into Regulus who gives it right back to him.

“You don’t know *anything*.”

“I know enough.”

“I never touched him.”

“But you didn’t stop it!” James is suddenly on his feet, voice too loud for the small compartment. Him and Regulus stand toe to toe, James has an inch or two of height on him, but not as much as he would have thought.

“I couldn’t,” Regulus says after a moment, the words barely making it passed his clenched teeth. “I couldn’t.”

There is a tiny part of James that knows that’s probably true. But in this moment he can’t be bothered to care. “Is that what you tell yourself?” he asks, eyes running the younger boy up and down with disgust. “Did you even fucking try?”

His cheeks flush, but the anger in his eyes comes back full force. “If he would just stop antagonizing them—“

“Antagonizing—oh you have got to be fucking kidding me,” James shouts outraged, reaching for his wand.

“James,” his name comes out short and strong. A command. He looks down to see Remus staring pointedly at him, one of his hands gripping Sirius’s arm—Sirius looks like he’d rather be just about anywhere else. James wants to protect him. He wants to keep him safe. He just wishes he knew how. “Enough now, yeah?” Remus goes on, eventually. James wants to fight back, he does, but the sick look on Sirius’s face keeps him still.

“Fine,” he mutters, dropping his hand and glaring as he falls back into his seat beside a very confused Peter. Regulus looks infuriating smug for a bloke who just nearly got his balls hexed off. He opens his mouth to speak but Sirius cuts him off.

“Go, Reg,” he sounds tired and it makes James’s chest ache. “Just go, yeah?”

His brother hesitates, eyes running Sirius over before he cautiously nods his head. He does not bother looking at James again before he slides the compartment door open and slips back into the corridor, like the snake that he is.

They’re quiet for a moment, the noise of the train and some rowdy students outside the only thing filling the space around them. Eventually, James sighs, bringing himself to look across at Sirius.

“I’m sorry.”

There’s a beat of stillness before a smirk makes its way onto Sirius’s face. “Should be, very anti-climatic that,” he nods his head towards the door. “Really thought I was gonna get to see

Reg punched in the face.”

James smiles back. “I wanted to, believe me. Moony’s disappointment was the only thing holding me back.”

Remus rolls his eyes, returning his attention to his book.

“Don’t know why, you’ve disappointed him plenty of times before.”

“I’m trying to be a better man.”

Sirius snorts, leaning back, one leg bent up on the seat, the other stretched out, taking up an unreasonable amount of foot space. “I see,” he takes on a rather haughty air. “Wouldn’t be trying to impress a certain prefect would you?”

James lets out a melodramatic sigh, hands clutching at his chest as he makes heart eyes at Remus. “I’m just waiting for the day that he wakes up and realizes I’ve been here all along.”

Remus snorts, eyes rising off his book. “Oh I know where you’ve been James Potter, and I’m not touching that with a ten foot pole.”

Sirius barks when he laughs, which is fitting really, the noise of it filling up the small space as the three of them dissolve into hysterics.

Remus rolls his eyes. “You lot are too easy, I swear.”

“Moons we can’t help it, you’re fucking hilarious,” Sirius claps him on the back.

“And don’t let anyone tell you any different,” James adds, wiping the tears of mirth from under his eyes.

“However,” Sirius continues, “I was thinking of a slightly more ginger prefect,” he shoots James a look, wiggling his eyebrows in a gesture that is equal parts suggestive and ridiculous.

“Really? No one’s coming to mind,” James says, suddenly intensely interested in his wand.

“Is that so?”

He shrugs, even though he can feel the blush heating up his face. “Sorry mate, no idea who you’re referring to.”

Sirius is barely holding it together but it’s Remus who speaks next. “Is this your new strategy then? Pretending she doesn’t exist? I’m not sure if that’s a sign of you progressing or regressing?”

Sirius snorts. “Regressing, must be.”

“It’s not a strategy,” James adjusts his robes. “I’m just done chasing after her, that’s all.”

All three of the other marauders give him near identical looks of disbelief.

“You’re having a laugh,” Sirius pokes.

But James shakes his head, cheeks still on fire. “I’m not. It’s bloody exhausting getting shot down all the time. Even I don’t have an unlimited supply of pride.”

It’s possible he isn’t being entirely truthful. He did do some soul searching over the summer, coming to the conclusion that the badgering and big showy gestures in his attempt to court Lily Evans were getting a bit, well, tired. Predictable was not something James Potter ever intended to be. And it did actually hurt every once and a while, when she would turn him down with a particularly sharp, and usually fairly accurate, attack of his character. But was there a tiny part of him that hoped this new leaf he was turning over would succeed in endearing him to her? Yes. Definitely. ‘Course he wasn’t about to tell anyone else that.

“Wow,” Sirius exhales, “end of an era ‘innit?”

James just shrugs again, forcing a casualness he does not feel. “Other fish in the sea and all that.”

Remus blinks, looks down at his book, blinks again. “My little boy’s all grown up,” he says with a quivering lip.

“Oh shut it!”

James reaches across and playfully punches his arm, Remus batting him away with his book, the lot of them laughing again.

“Wait, wait, not that I’m not fascinated by James’s love life—or lack there of—“

“Hey!” James pipes up, but Peter ignores him, turning to Sirius and causing a rock to plummet into James’s stomach. “But is someone going to explain to me what just happened with Regulus? He was acting like he hadn’t seen you in weeks.”

Sirius’s lazy posture grows forced. “Probably because he has’t. Spent the summer at the Potters’.”

There’s a beat of silence.

“Your mum okay with that?”

Sirius shrugs. “Don’t think she cares one way or the other to be honest with you. Not anymore.”

Peter screws his face up, while Remus sits deathly still, eyes running Sirius over like he’s worried any sudden movement will spook him. It’s not an unfair assumption. Sirius always gets tetchy when he talks about his family.

“Won’t you get in trouble?” Peter finally asks, in a tone that suggests he’s feeling as though he missed the punchline of the joke.

“Don’t know how, seeing as I’m not going back,” he smiles, but it doesn’t look quite right, and James feels his chest squeeze at the sight of it.

“Not going back?” Remus repeats slowly, gaze jumping from Sirius’s face to James’s.

James nods. “He’s taken up permanent residence at mine, fucking drifter.”

“Ooh, like that, makes me sound dead mysterious,” Sirius grins. “Now, which one of you suckers wants to lose at exploding snaps?”

And that was that.

It feels good, being back in the dormitory. It always feels good, the four of them together, like they belong. Admittedly, it feels less good to be back in class. It isn’t that James has an issue with school on a practical level—he is, all things considered, rather brilliant. Which has the unintended effect of making school a bit of a chore. The first few years he’d gotten a kick out of being top of the class, but the shine has worn off. Now a days he lets Remus and Lily fight over the top spot, he has more important matters to attend to—pranks to pull, chaos to spread, etcetera etcetera. Sirius is the same. Or he had been. Things are a little...different, this year. If he's forced to admit it, which he sometimes is by a particularly concerned werewolf, he would say that Sirius is being more reckless this year than he has been in the past. There's a chaotic energy that seems to hover beneath his skin and threaten to explode at any moment. Pity the suckers who are around when it does.

“It’s the second week,” Remus hisses at him across the library table as James tries half-heartedly to get through his potions homework.

“Surprisingly, I do own a calendar.”

He doesn’t need to look up to know that Remus is glaring at him. “He’s been in detention practically since we got here.”

James shrugs. “That’s not all that strange for him.”

There is another pause, no doubt to accommodate more glaring.

“*James.*”

It’s the shift in his tone that finally makes James look up—Remus sounds...scared. He meets Remus’s giant, beseeching brown eyes and lets out a sigh, dropping his quill and running a hand through his mop of hair.

“Yeah alright, it’s been a bit full on.”

It’s not that Sirius has done anything particularly outlandish—transfiguring Mrs. Norris into a duck, sticking the Slytherin cutlery to the table with a permanent sticking charm, setting a bunch of bludgers loose in the halls (that one had been a tad extreme). While he's sure Remus

is concerned for all the right reasons—he usually is—personally, the thing James is most peeved about is the fact that he hasn’t been consulted on a single one of these stunts.

“They were spur of the moment,” Sirius said, when James broached the topic. *“Just right place right time, you know, if I’d thought about it for even a second I’d have told you.”*

Shockingly, this had not remotely satisfied James’s ego.

“I’m worried about him,” Remus whispers, bringing James back to the present.

“I know.”

Remus’s cheeks go pink as he looks down, fiddling with his quill. “I feel like I’m flying a little blind here,” he says finally. “I know that something happened this summer. But I don’t—I mean he didn’t just walk out of that house. And I know it’s not really my business—“

“Says who?”

Remus looks up at that, sending James a grateful smile.

“Listen, Moony,” he puts his arms down on the table, leaning closer to his friend, “we’re a team, yeah?”

“I swear to merlin if you’re about to make a Quidditch reference.”

James laughs. “No, no I wouldn’t do that to you.”

“You absolutely would.”

James pushes playfully at Remus’s shoulder. “I’m just saying—*trying* to say—it’s all four of us. We’re in this together.”

Remus arches his brow. “In what together?”

James gestures to the space around them. “This, life, all of it. We’re in it together. You care about him, you want to help, I get it. I think he should tell you the whole story, really I do. But *I* can’t tell you—because it’s not mine to tell.”

Remus’s eyes go wide. “No, I wasn’t trying to—“

But James waves a lazy hand, knocking his worries away. “I know Moons, I know. I’m just telling you so you understand that there’s not some secret club between the two of us.”

There’s an uncomfortable pause that James was not entirely prepared for.

“I mean,” Remus shrugs, “there is a bit.”

He knows they’re not supposed to, but those words sting, and James finds himself sitting back, running a frustrated hand through his hair.

“It’s fine James,” Remus goes on, clearly trying to cover up how very not fine it is. “You’re allowed to have a best friend.”

James scowls. “I have three best friends.”

Remus arches a skeptical brow but James refuses to backdown. After a few minutes of staring one another down Remus breaks, shaking his head with a laugh. “Jesus James, alright.”

James smiles. “I love being right.”

“I don’t think that’s exactly what I said,” Remus huffs, but the little smile still in the corner of his mouth is enough to satisfy James.

“Listen, Moons,” he starts again, tone more serious, “me and Sirius, we’re similar, at least in the obvious ways—the ways that everyone can spot. More than you and me or me and Pete, but that doesn’t mean I love you any less, yeah?”

Remus blinks at him, a look on his face that James can’t quite read. “James...” he says slowly, “are you...proposing?”

James snorts, earning him an aggressive “sh” from the Ravenclaw at the next table. “Why?” he arches his brow suggestively, “would you say yes?”

“Absolutely not.”

“Ah,” he clutches at his chest. “Remus, you wound me.”

Remus rolls his eyes, picking up his quill again. “I’m sure you’ll live,” he hovers the point over his parchment but doesn’t pressed down. And then: “thanks, for...saying all that,” his voice a little tight, “I—it’s appreciated.”

James nods. “Course.”

“And Sirius...”

James sighs. “Sirius,” he scrubs at his face with his hands before dropping them back on the table. “I think we just have to, you know, keep an eye on him. Be there. When he needs us.”

“Reckon we can handle that.”

“Yeah, me too.”

There’s a beat of silence before they both turn reluctantly back to their homework. Well, James is reluctant, Remus seems perfectly happy. But then, the bastard has already finished his potions, and is very rudely refusing to let James copy.

“Hey James?” Remus says after a few moments have passed.

His eyes flick up briefly but Remus’s are still on the parchment in front of him.

“I love you too, just so you know.” The words are quiet and fast and all squished together and it’s so very charming and so very Moony that James’s grin is almost too big for his face.

“I’m thinking July.”

Remus looks up. “July?”

“For the wedding.”

James cackles, ducking under the table as a quill is launched at his head.

The first time he sees Regulus after the train, James is sneaking down to the kitchen’s under the invisibility cloak some time around midnight. It’s the third week of school and Sirius’s stunt pulling has not in anyway diminished. James is worried it’s starting to prematurely age Remus. The problem with Sirius is you have to let him spin out a bit, not too far, of course, but it’s like his feelings are too big. Too big to speak or think, so he has to act.

James rounds a corner and nearly runs headlong into the person on the other side. Luckily, he catches himself in time, flattening out against the wall as a very purposeful looking Slytherin pushes past him. It takes a few moments for his brain to catch up, fitting the curly black hair and haughty expression into place. By the time he realizes who it is Regulus is already half-way up a flight of stairs, headed very much away from the Slytherin common room.

For a moment James is frozen. Unable to decide which is stronger: his hunger or his curiosity? He’s barely made a decision before he’s taking the stairs two at a time, trying to close the gap between him and Regulus before he loses him.

The younger boy moves nothing like Sirius—he’s all rigid straight lines and perfect posture. It makes James want to trip him, the pretentious prick. If he hadn’t been so preoccupied with the position of Regulus’s shoulders...and arms...and...hips, he probably would have realized where they were headed a lot sooner. But it’s not until Regulus is throwing open the door—with James close behind—that he realizes they’ve climbed all the way up to the astronomy tower.

James leans against the outer wall, watching as Regulus walks towards the edge of the tower. In the summer, when it doesn’t get quite so cold after the sun sets, this is where people come to snog—and maybe a bit more if they’re feeling adventurous. But somehow James can’t quite picture Regulus being the type for a quick hook-up—he really is nothing like Sirius.

The other boy is leaning over the edge of the railing, eyes on the sky which is, admittedly, rather stunning at this time of night. All velvet black and sparkling stars. The moon is beginning to fill out, something James has learned to watch with wariness.

He keeps expecting someone to come through the door, surely this is some kind of rendezvous even if not of the sexy variety. But no. No one comes. The only thing that happens is Regulus pulls a telescope from his pocket, un-shrinking it with the wave of his

wand and then peering at the sky. For a horrifying minute James wonders if he's just gone and got himself stuck up here watching Regulus do his astrology homework.

James pushes off the wall and steps closer, watching as Regulus spins a dozen different dials, adjusting the lenses. Whatever he's doing, it's practiced. Nothing about his fingers is unsure. He's always thought of Regulus as being so much younger than them, even though there's only a year between them. But he's grown over the summer, James noticed his height on the train but now he can see that his shoulders and chest have started to fill out—his hair longer. Like Sirius's, except neater.

Eventually Regulus's hands stop moving. He stares through the telescope for a solid few minutes before sighing and straightening up, eyes still on the sky.

"She's gotten worse you know," the words heavy, "since you left."

James jumps at the sound of his voice, surprised, and momentarily afraid that he's somehow let the invisibility cloak slip. But no, Regulus isn't looking at him, his eyes still staring straight ahead.

"Did you even think, for one second, about what would happen to me?" he laughs coldly, looking down for the first time and scuffing his shoe on the ground. "I don't know how to handle them anymore, I used to, but lately it's...fuck, lately I can't *breathe*."

His voice has gotten thick and James thinks there's a chance he might actually be crying, but when Regulus looks up again his face is dry. He scrubs at it with his hands before letting out an exhausted sigh. His eyes get caught in the moonlight and the sight makes James's breath catch in his chest. There's something overwhelming about them. He doesn't think he's ever seen Regulus look this full before. Normally he's a stiff cut-out of a person, parroting his parents, practically two dimensional. But not here, not tonight. Tonight he feels so big.

With another piercing look through the telescope he waves his wand and the thing shrinks to the size of a keychain. James watches him slip it into his pocket, watches him go back into the castle, the distant noise of his footsteps audible even after the door closes.

He feels off kilter. The entire time he's known Regulus he's been a spoiled, spineless git, who treated Sirius like he was a disappointment. An embarrassment. But whatever just happened—and he's still not entirely clear on *what* just happened—it didn't...fit.

He's still stewing over it fifteen minutes later when he walks through the portrait and into the Gryffindor common room, invisibility cloak in hand.

"Oi!" he looks up and sees Sirius, Peter and Remus all waiting by the fire, everyone else clearly gone to bed. Sirius raises his brows and gestures emphatically at James's visibly empty hands. "What the hell Prongs? Where are the snacks?"

"Snacks?" but as soon as the word is out of his mouth it dawns on him why he left in the first place. "Right—er—sorry, Filch was about so..." he shrugs, before moving towards the staircase.

“Filch?” Sirius squawks indignantly behind him. “Since when has Filch ever stopped us from doing anything? You had the cloak for fuck’s sake!”

James doesn’t bother replying, suddenly feeling incredibly tired as he jogs up to their dorm room. He doesn’t put on pyjamas, just strips down to his pants and crawls under the covers, closing the bed curtains around him. He wants to sleep off whatever the hell this weird feeling is that’s sitting in the pit of his stomach. But despite his best efforts his mind keeps lingering on the memory of Regulus’s face—those stupid fucking eyes. The last thing he hears before falling asleep is Regulus’s voice in his head, whispering over and over again.

I can’t breathe.

Chapter End Notes

I have been obsessed with this pairing since Jegulus week but I haven't found any longer fics with them (if you have them pls send me those recs!!) so I thought I'd give it shot!

Comments are always appreciated :)

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Remus is going through it in this one - I know, shocking, a new direction for this character, his life is usually so easy.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

He never gets used to it. The full moon. It starts a week before - Remus goes to bed early, he gets headaches, backaches, loses his appetite - James hates it. Hates that there's nothing he can do, and that everything he says just seems to make things worse. Remus can't stand being fussed over, or when they hover around him. James gets it. Sirius gets it less—which is ironic considering he can be such an antisocial prick when he's in a mood.

On the really bad moons, Remus can't get out of bed. On the better ones he drags himself through his classes. Those days are the most stressful if James is honest, because Remus is so sensitive. He winces at the light, the noise, at being touched, which sends Sirius into overprotective mode and means that James spends the whole day trying to keep the both of them in one piece.

“Pads—Sirius! Come on mate, calm down,” James mutters, one arm wrapped around Sirius's middle as he drags him down the hall.

“I'll calm down when McAllen learns to WATCH WHERE THE FUCK HE'S GOING!” Sirius shouts at the quickly retreating back of a Hufflepuff third year.

“Merlin's tits, you wanna try not making me go deaf at the tender age of fifteen?” James is still dragging Sirius along, Peter and Remus up ahead, having not stopped to witness the spectacle that was Black v. McAllen.

“Prick.”

“At least you're self-aware.”

Sirius scowls at him. “I *meant* McAllen.”

“I don't see why, he was just trying to walk down the hall.”

“He ran straight into Moony!”

James rolls his eyes. “He barely touched him, and it's not as though it was on purpose.”

Sirius looks mutinous but when he speaks he isn't angry. Not exactly. "He winced, Prongs—he—" but Sirius's voice drops off, unwilling or unable to finish that thought.

James finds his eyes trailing to the sandy blond head in front of them, "I know."

He doesn't bother pointing out that on days like today Remus winces if you breathe too hard near him. He really ought to stay in the dorm, but he never does. He has to be practically catatonic before he'll consider missing class.

"Oh good," the boy in question says dryly, as they catch up to him and Peter outside the common room, "he's stopped shouting."

The portrait swings open and the four of them tumble inside, Sirius looking sufficiently cowed.

"Sorry Moony," he mutters, hands in his pockets.

Remus looks over at him, a weak smile managing to pull at his mouth. "It's fine—just, maybe try not to fight everyone who steps near me, yeah?"

Sirius lets out a dismissive "pfft" while simultaneously glaring at a group of second years who've dared to start walking in their direction. James is pretty sure he hears one of them actually squeal in fear. It's a miracle they manage to make it up to their room without anyone being challenged to a duel.

"I'm serious you know," Remus says, making a bee-line for his bed, more out of breath than he should be and with a sickly sweat covering his skin.

Sirius's eyes light up. "No, *I'm* Siri—"

James has his wand in Sirius's face before he can finish his sentence. "I swear to Merlin, if you make that joke one more time I'm going to hex your eyebrows off."

Sirius chokes back a laugh, hands coming up in mock surrender. "Don't know why you're pointing that thing at me, Moony's the one who started it," he sends Remus a wink over James's shoulder that earns him an unimpressed huff.

"I like him better than you," James says simply, dropping his wand.

"Please, you couldn't live without me."

James rolls his eyes, knocking his shoulder into Sirius's. "Prick."

"Twat," Sirius knocks him right back.

It feels good, joking around after the day they've had. A break in the tension that's been pulling at the four of them. Ready to snap. James exhales and feels his shoulders drop away from his neck.

“Sorry Moony,” Sirius goes on jovially, “you were saying something before Jamie so rudely interrupted us?”

But Remus has seemingly stopped paying attention, sitting on his bed with his head in his hands, his whole body rigid.

“Remus?” there's new urgency in Sirius's voice as he steps forward, James also inching closer. Sometimes, on the day of the transformation, things can happen too soon. One bone breaking hours before the moon has risen. One organ beginning the shift when the rest of the body has yet to wake up. It's rare, but it happens, leading to frantic emergency Infirmary visits. The first time was the worst, but it never stops being scary.

“Sorry,” slowly, Remus pulls his hands away from his face, and James thinks he hears Sirius let out a sigh of relief, “headache.”

James almost laughs at how inadequate that is, even just looking at Remus you can tell the word “headache” doesn't cover it. It's another few minutes before Remus actually manages to lift his eyes off the floor, looking directly at Sirius. “I don't need you to protect me.”

Sirius blinks. “What?”

“That's what I was trying to say—before. That I mean it. I'm not some...*invalid*,” the last word comes out sharp. “I can handle myself.”

A series of emotions flicker across Sirius's face so quickly that James can't catch any of them.

“I know that,” he says finally.

“Do you?” the words barely make it passed Remus's teeth.

Peter, who had been lying facedown on his bed, sits up at that, sending James a worried look across the room. This is not going anywhere good.

“Yeah,” Sirius says, starting to sound irritated now. “Of course I do. But just because you can handle it, doesn't mean you should have to.”

“Sirius,” Remus sounds tired, passing a hand over his face. “I—appreciate that. But I don't need a bloody bodyguard.”

Sirius huffs, crossing his arms over his chest. “You're being dramatic.”

“He's really not. You go more mental around the full moon than he does,” Peter says, before ducking to avoid the pillow Sirius chucks at his head.

James is grateful for the interruption, they're all strung too tightly for this conversation. And the last thing anyone needs is Remus and Sirius going at each other. It doesn't happen that often, but when it does it's fucking vicious.

“I need you to have some faith in me Sirius, alright?” Remus’s voice has softened a little, the pair of them staring at one another so intensely James feels like maybe he should leave the room.

“Moony,” Sirius says finally. “I’ll build you a bloody church if that’s what you want.”

James snorts, earning him a pointed stare from Remus. “Don’t encourage him,” but he’s clearly fighting off a smile.

“Since when does Sirius need encouragement to be an idiot?”

“Oi!” Sirius shouts indignantly, causing Remus to roll his eyes.

With the potential row averted James finds himself following Pete’s example and collapsing onto his bed. His whole body sighs with relief, sinking into the extraordinarily soft mattress. He’s almost certain the beds at Hogwarts have been charmed because he’s never slept on anything so comfortable. In the background he can hear the vague noises of Peter and Sirius talking—something about trading chocolate frog cards—Peter is obsessed with them. He wants to be the first wizard to have a full set. It doesn’t seem to matter how many times James tries to explain that it’s not possible, they put out new cards practically daily, Peter is determined.

It’s not until he hears the rattling of curtains being pulled shut that his eyes open and he props himself up on his elbows to see that Remus has closed his bed off. Across the room Sirius and Peter have stopped their bickering, Sirius sending James a concerned look.

“Hey Moons?” James asks tentatively. “You need anything? Food? Water? Pepperup?”

There’s a small pause before he answers. “No. Just...quiet, would be good.”

James nods, even though Remus can’t see him, sliding off his mattress and back onto his feet.

“C’mon Pete, lets go,” Sirius is already at the door.

Peter looks at him with confusion. “Go where?”

“Out,” James says, joining Sirius.

“But we just got in,” there is a slight whine to his voice.

“Yeah, but Moony wants quiet so we gotta clear out.”

“I can be quiet,” Peter protests.

Sirius and James both make sounds of disbelief. “Yeah, not likely, come on you twat, lets go, chop, chop.”

Still grumbling Peter follows them out of the room and as the door is closing James swears he hears the faint sound of a “thank you” coming from Remus’s bed.

It's a rather uneventful evening, all things considered. They spend most of it in the common room, one of them sporadically going upstairs to check on Remus. They bring him a plate from dinner knowing he probably won't be well enough to eat any of it.

By seven o'clock they're all lounging about by the fireplace again, Pete playing chess with one of the fourth years, Sirius chatting up Mary while she sits shamelessly on his lap and James trying very resolutely not to look—or think—about the red head doing her charms work in the corner. In fact, he is not thinking about her so hard that he doesn't even notice that Remus has come down until he hears his scratchy voice behind him.

“Since when is that a thing?”

James starts, surprised to find a pale Remus hovering over his shoulder. He's sitting far enough from the others that no one else seems to have noticed his arrival either.

“Since when is what a thing?” he asks perplexed, Remus gestures with his chin and James follows his gaze to Sirius and Mary who seem to have decided that snogging one another in the middle of the common room is perfectly acceptable behaviour.

“Uh...don't know...been flirting with each other since last year though, haven't they?”

“Have they?” the tense tone of Remus's voice brings James's attention back to him. He looks like he's in pain—lips pressed together, eyes tight—but then, he is in pain, so that's not really surprising. Still, James can't help but feel that something is wrong.

“You okay Moony?”

Remus blinks, eyes still across the room, it takes a few seconds before he seems able to tear them away, swallowing thickly before he speaks. “Yeah—yeah, just the full moon, you know?”

James nods slowly, not sure why it doesn't sound like the truth. “Heading to the infirmary?”

“Yeah,” Remus wraps the jumper he's wearing more tightly around himself. “Better get going actually, she'll give me hell if I'm late.”

“I'll come with,” James says, getting to his feet.

“You don't have to—” but James waves his words away, already walking towards the portrait, Remus trailing slightly behind.

They walk in silence, the hallways mostly empty, people either still in the great hall or tucked away in their dorms for the night. It's a Wednesday, which means Remus is likely stressing about whether or not he'll be well enough to make it to classes tomorrow. He won't be, but James doesn't point that out. Especially since he knows that Remus will end up going anyway, which means Sirius will inevitably end up trying to fight someone. James lifts his glasses and massages the bridge of his nose, already tired.

“So,” Remus says, voice rough, “how’s quidditch going?”

A laugh bursts out of James before he can help it. “Merlin, you must be desperate for conversation if you’re willing to talk about quidditch.”

Remus smiles at him out of the corner of his mouth. “Mostly I just know it’s a conversation I won’t be expected to contribute much to.”

“I’ll never understand why you hate it.”

“I know you won’t.”

James looks over at him, but the smile is gone now, his face tense and nervous.

“Really Moons,” he tries to inject as much sincerity as he can into his words, “are you okay?”

Remus lets out a dry laugh and James quickly corrects himself. “I know—I know that you’re not *physically* okay. I’m not asking that—you just seem a little bit more...I don’t know, sad?”

Remus doesn’t answer right away, doesn’t answer for a long time actually, doesn’t look at James either. When they slow in front of the infirmary doors James half expects him to just walk on through without another word.

But he doesn’t.

“I hate this,” he whispers, he looks small in a way Remus almost never does. He isn’t loud and out of control like James and Sirius, but he’s...strong. When Remus John Lupin puts his foot down there is no negotiating. No changing his mind. He’s like a fucking mountain—commanding authority and respect in a way that James and Sirius never could. So seeing him like this—seeing him waver—it makes something in James’s chest ache.

“Sometimes I just wish,” Remus goes on, closing his eyes as he breathes out, “that I was someone else. Anyone else. Anything has to be better than this. Than me.”

James’s insides twist, wrecked by the pain in Remus’s voice. It takes him a while to get himself under control enough to speak. “I know this is going to make me sound like a selfish dick,” Remus laughs at that, eyes still closed. “But personally, I’m so fucking glad you’re you.”

There’s a moment of stillness in which James is almost positive he’s said the wrong thing, but then Remus opens his eyes, and they’re watery but he’s smiling again, even if it’s only a little.

“Thanks.”

There’s too much in that word for either of them to fully appreciate.

“Of course.”

Remus sighs, pressing the heels of his hands into to his eyes. “Well,” he says eventually. “I’ll see you, I guess...”

James nods. “You will.”

And with that Remus turns away, and James can’t quite make himself move even when the door closes.

There’s too much time before they have to leave for the shack and James is too twitchy to go back to the dormitory. He needs to do something. To move. Part of him feels like grabbing the cloak and going back to sit with Remus until it’s time. It’s not that he’s never heard him talk like that before—of course he has. Every few months there’s a particularly bad moon that makes Remus’s gaze hard to hold. The three of them being with him, it helps. But it doesn’t fix anything. And James hates that. Hates that the best thing he could come up with doesn’t even come close to a solution.

“You’re pathetic you are.”

The sound of voices up ahead snaps him out of his thoughts. He stumbles to a stop, somewhere near the library—admittedly he hadn’t really been paying attention to where he was going. There’s the sound of scuffling around the corner and then a thud—someone being slammed against the wall he reckons.

“Awe look, I think he’s going to cry. Are you gonna cry wittle baby?”

“Merlin, your poor mother, stuck with two pansies for sons.”

James already has his wand out even before he hears the third, and unmistakable, voice of Severus fucking Snape: “Stop playing with your food Mulciber, some of us have places to be.”

Without another thought James steps around the bend. There’s three of them—all Slytherins, of course—Mulciber with his hand on some kid’s throat, holding him to the wall, Avery and Snape standing beside him. Snape looking bored, Avery giddy.

“Places to be? You? That can’t be right. Oh wait, let me guess, you got a hot date with the Giant Squid?” James casts a wordless incarcarrow at Mulciber who is instantly thrown to the ground as ropes snake around his arms and legs. James can’t help grinning—he’s been practicing that one.

“Fucking Potter—“

“Expelliarmus,” James catches Avery’s wand as it flips through the air. He barely has time to blink in Snape’s direction before he hears the beginning of a *Levicorpus*. He dives to the side just as the spell fires, missing him by an inch and cracking the stone wall behind him.

James laughs, straightening up with two wands in his hands, Mulciber grunting on the floor. “Careful there Snivellus, wouldn’t want our little prefect getting in trouble now, would we?”

The pair have their wands up and ready but neither moves. Snape's face is pinched, his lanky hair curtaining it on either side, out of the corner of his eye James sees Avery take a step forward and quickly points his own wand at him. "Ah, ah, ah."

Avery growls. "It's not going to let you cast, it's not loyal to you."

"Wanna bet?" the whole time he doesn't take his eyes off of Snape.

"Will someone get rid of these bloody ropes!" Mulciber shouts.

James arches his brow. "Sounds like your friend could use some help there."

"You better watch your mouth Potter," Snape hisses.

"Is this about the squid comment? Honestly I'm happy for you, I hear she puts out."

Snape fires off a stupefy but James blocks it easily.

"See, this is why you were always so crap at quidditch," James says conversationally, enjoying himself perhaps a little too much for someone currently outnumbered three to one. "So fucking predictable."

"I noticed you stopped making a fool of yourself in front of Lily," Snape shoots back, a leer hanging in the corner of his mouth. "Finally realize she'll never look twice at a moron like you?"

Admittedly, that stings more than James would like it to, a few choice memories of his proposals to Evans sneaking unwelcome into his thoughts. "That depends," he says, shaking his head clear, happy to find his voice unaffected, "have you?"

Snape's face clouds over and James is certain he's about to get hexed again.

But he doesn't.

Something shifts. Snape straightens up, a cocky smirk replacing his scowl.

"I'm going to enjoy it you know," his words make as little sense to James as his sudden change in mood.

"You're going to enjoy it?" James repeats slowly. "Enjoy what you creep, fucking the Giant Squid?"

But for the first time in their lives Snape doesn't rise to the bait. "This is all irrelevant Potter, all so insignificant compared to what's coming. And it's not going to be long now, I can wait. I can be so patient."

"Oh well, don't stop there Snivellus," James adjusts the grip on his wand, eyes doing a quick scan of the corridor, trying to figure out what he's missed. "Share with the class why don't you."

But Snape only smiles. “I just hope I’m there to see it.”

Now James is starting to get irritated. “See what?”

“See them break you.” He slides his wand back up the sleeve of his robes like James isn’t still armed and aiming at him.

“Break m—“

But Snape cuts across him, speaking directly to Avery: “Get him up, we’re done here.” He kicks Mulciber with the toe of his shoe before turning away and skulking down the corridor.

“What the fuck Snape?” James shouts after him, with half a mind to follow. The problem is, Snape put his wand away, and as much of a git as he is, James isn’t about to start firing hexes at someone who isn’t armed.

“Oi!”

Avery’s nasally voice breaks through his thoughts, bringing his attention back to the two idiots still in front of him. Mulciber now teetering on his feet still bound by James’s ropes, Avery scowling. “My wand Potter,” he holds out his hand expectantly.

James arches his brow. “No please? Come now Avery, surely your mother taught you better than that?”

“Give. Me. My. Wand.” His face is so red and angry James half expects it to burst open. He considers toying with them a little longer but he really should be heading back to the others.

“You want this?” he holds up Avery’s wand, twirling it between his fingers.

“You know I do, you twat.”

James nods, barely holding back a grin. “Well alright then,” he winds his arm back and chucks the wand down to the other end of the corridor.

“Bastard!”

“Go on doggy,” James says with barely contained glee, “fetch.”

Growling, Avery takes off after his wand.

“Hey!” Mulciber shouts. “Hey wait—fucking—Merlin’s tits, wait!”

James can’t control himself anymore, laughter bursting out of him as he watches Mulciber hop down the corridor like some kind of monstrous rabbit.

It’s not until then that he remembers the fourth member of the party. The victim—still sitting where Mulciber dropped him, back to the wall, knees pulled up. James feels his heart stutter for a moment.

“Regulus?” he asks incredulously.

Grey eyes meet his. Despite his current state, there isn’t a lick of embarrassment in Regulus’s stare. If anything, he looks resigned.

“Yes, sorry,” he says dryly. “I would have made myself known sooner only, I thought it might take away from your heroics if you realized who you were saving.”

James blinks, still adjusting to the fact of his presence. “You think I would have let them carry on if I realized it was you?” Regulus just stares back at him flatly, which only manages to irritate James. “I wouldn’t have. Of course I wouldn’t have.”

There’s a brief pause before a snarky smile spreads across Regulus’s face. “No, I suppose you wouldn’t, saintly reputation to uphold and all that. Gosh, what must it be like to be so righteous?” Regulus either doesn’t expect, or desire, an answer, because he gets to his feet, picking up his fallen wand and books and turning to give a gapping James Potter another hard look.

“Well,” he says, running James over with his eyes, “cheers.”

He turns on his heel, walking down the now empty corridor.

James could let it go, he absolutely could. He certainly has more important things to be doing right now than bothering with Regulus Black. He could let it go—except, of course, that he can’t at all.

“What the hell was that all about then?” he asks as he falls in step with the younger boy.

Regulus sends him a look out of the corner of his eye. “Oh joy, you’re following me.”

James pointedly ignores that comment. “With Snape and them—didn’t think Slytherin’s picked on their own?”

Regulus lets out a dry laugh. “Didn’t you?”

And, well, James has no idea what to do with that. “Regulus—“

“Please stop calling me that.”

James wrinkles his nose. “Well I can’t call you *Black*.”

“And why not?” they round another corner and James realizes, with some trepidation, that they’re heading towards the dungeons. He’ll be outnumbered by a lot more than three down there.

“I don’t know, cause your brother’s my best mate?”

Regulus sends him another sidelong glance. “I don’t know what that has to do with me.”

“It would be weird.”

“I assure you, it wouldn’t.”

James lets out an exasperated sigh. “Right, okay,” he runs a hand through his hair, “say I call you Black, will you tell me what happened then?”

Regulus rolls his eyes. “Severus asked me to do a favour for him,” he says coldly.

James waits for more but Regulus is frustratingly unforthcoming. “Based on that little melodrama, I’m guessing you told him no?”

There’s a pause, their steps echoing in the empty hall.

“I told him to blow me.”

The laugh that comes out of James makes Regulus start so hard he almost drops his books.

“Christ,” the younger boy swears as James tries to contain himself. “What the hell was that?”

“It’s called laughter, you should try it sometime.”

Regulus glares. “That was not a laugh, that was a fucking banshee cry.”

But James only smiles. “I’m choosing to take that as a compliment.”

“I promise you, it wasn’t one.”

“Oh well, too late now,” there’s a curl of pride in James’s stomach at the sight of a smile hiding in Regulus’s mouth. He’s never seen that before. Never seen Regulus do anything but scowl.

“So he didn’t take you up on your offer then?” James asks eventually.

“Funnily enough, no.”

James smirks, shoving his hands in his pockets as they pass by a pack of Ravenclaw girls who almost immediately start whispering to each other. James is usually quite happy to be the subject of school gossip, but for some reason this attention makes him feel antsy.

“I’m surprised you let dumb and dumber back there disarm you,” he starts talking again to distract himself.

Regulus snorts, keeping his eyes on the space ahead of him and very resolutely off of James. “They didn’t disarm me,” and then, after a beat, “Mulciber punched me. In retrospect, I really should have seen that coming.”

James looks over at him and notices the bruise on his jaw for the first time. It sends an eery shiver down his spine, images of Sirius standing so lost and hurt on his doorstep. He looks away.

“Well,” Regulus comes to a stop in the middle of the corridor, pulling James up short. The two of them stand facing one another for the first time. *God*, James can’t help but think, *those fucking eyes*. He’s not sure what it is exactly, just that when he looks at them it hurts. “As strange as this has all been, I really think it would be best for us to part ways now.” When James just stares blankly back at him he continues, with the air of the long suffering. “As much as I appreciate your...assistance—“

“*Assistance?*” James laughs, thinking it’s a funny way of saying ‘thanks for saving my ass.’

Regulus ignores him. “Being walked to my dorm by James Potter is hardly going to help matters.”

James splutters. “I’m not walking you to your dorm.”

Regulus blinks at him, looks down the hall, then blinks at him again. “Potter, that is *literally* what you’re doing.”

“No I’m—well, it’s just when you put it like that it sounds like—cause I’m not—I’m just, we’re just walking, I’m not...” for some reason he can’t explain the heat is rising in his face, his hand going nervously to the back of his neck.

Regulus stares back at him for the longest thirty seconds of James’s life before he lets out an aggravated sigh—unnecessarily aggravated, in James’s opinion. “Okay then. Goodbye Potter.”

He watches Regulus walk away, almost thinks he’s going to let him. And then: “Hey, Regulus?”

The younger boy stops, but it takes him a while before he turns around, that look of resignation back on his face. He doesn’t say anything, just watches James expectantly.

“What was Snape on about?” he pushes away the nagging feeling in his stomach that insists he already knows. Because it can’t be that. It can’t. Not here. Snape is a prick but he’s not—he can’t be.

Regulus’s eyes widen slightly, and he suddenly looks startling young. James almost wants to take it back, if it’s going to make Regulus look at him like that.

The other boy opens and closes his mouth several times but nothing comes out. Eventually, he sighs, grey eyes full of something like pity. “You really should get out of here James,” and that’s it. He turns around again and doesn’t stop.

James might have protested, might have gone after him and demanded an actual answer, except that his ears are ringing with that last word. *James. James. James*. His name sounds different, spoken in Regulus’s haughty drawl, and it’s making something warm bloom inside him.

“Where the hell have you been?” Sirius demands, ten minutes later when he makes it back up to their dorm room. “We’re almost late.” He whips the invisibility cloak at James who fumbles it.

“Sorry, ran into Snape and his lot,” James mutters as the three of them climb under the cloak, Peter already a rat riding on Sirius’s shoulder.

“They ambush you?” Sirius asks, tone suddenly much more understanding.

“Nah, other way around. Found them picking on some kid,” the guilt is instant. He doesn’t lie to Sirius, not really. And he has no idea why he’s doing it now.

“Wankers, we’ll have to organize a little payback huh? Take them down a few pegs.”

James nods as they slip out of the common room and into the hall. “Definitely.”

Peter Squeaks in agreement.

It’s a seamless walk to the shack, they’ve done it so many times by now they’re old hats—know which stairs to take, what halls to avoid, what time Pomfrey leaves—which is never soon enough in James’s opinion. Once they nearly ran into her in the tunnel and it was a fucking disaster.

“Hey Moons,” Sirius says, as they whip off the cloak in the shack’s upstairs bedroom.

“Hey,” Remus croaks, he’s sitting on the dirty mattress on the floor, head between his knees, breathing too fast. He doesn’t look at them.

Sirius kneels next to him, carefully rubbing his back, while Peter scurries onto his lap. Remus makes a sound somewhere between a laugh and a sob. “You lot are ridiculous, you know that?”

“We’ve been told,” James says, stashing the cloak before he joins his friends, sitting on the floor in front of them.

Remus lets out another choked noise. “It’s bad tonight. I don’t know why it’s so bad tonight. F-fuck.”

Sirius looks at James, his eyes tight. “We’re here Moony,” he says softly. “We’ll be here the whole time.”

Remus nods in a jerky movement, visibly shaking now. “You should change.”

James gets to his feet, Peter scurrying off of Remus to come stand by his feet. But Sirius is reluctant to move, continuing to rub comforting circles on Remus’s back until the screaming starts. That’s always the hardest part for James. Remus’s voice tries to tear itself apart as he convulses on the bed, skin beginning to split open.

His thoughts change slightly when he's a stag. They become more simple—he sees and hears and tastes the world differently, new senses filtering into his brain in a way that is distinctly not human.

The first thing his stag brain thinks when Remus has fully transformed, is wrong.

Wrong.

Something is wrong.

He doesn't know what it is, the wolf is on edge, tense and twitchy. It doesn't follow them as willingly out of the shack as it usually does, a low growling emanating from its chest the whole time. It makes James nervous, his pulse beating in time with his thoughts.

Wrong.

Wrong.

Wrong.

They're barely past the tree line when he lunges. Claws out, teeth barred. Padfoot only just doges him, scrambling away in surprise. They play with the wolf all the time—tackling one another, sometimes nipping each other on the shoulder or ear. But this is different.

Wrong.

Wrong.

Wrong.

The wolf makes another attempt but this time James is there, stepping between the pair and pushing the wolf back, pounding his hooves into the dirt. The wolf glares at him so James tilts his head down, threatening his antlers. He's not going to use them, but the wolf doesn't need to know that.

After a few more seconds of glaring at one another Moony skulks off, running deeper into the forest.

He's angry.

Why is he angry?

Padfoot comes up beside him, Peter making figure-eights as he runs around their legs, letting out little nervous squeaks. After a few minutes he swears he hears Padfoot huff and then he starts off after Moony. James follows, making sure to keep close to him.

They find the wolf by a small stream about half a mile in. Drinking. Padfoot goes bounding into the water, face spreading into a grin, tongue hanging out. James joins him. Moony lays down sulkily on the beach but at least he seems calmer.

It's a nice night, warm, the moon and stars so bright they're almost blinding. Moony, apparently bored, gets back on his feet and takes off again, into the forest. The rest of them are quick to follow, Padfoot shaking his fur dry in a move that is very reminiscent of his human form. They know the forest pretty well by now but James still feels himself getting disoriented. Moony is going deep. Too deep. Padfoot barks, trying to call him back. James can't see him anymore, it's too dark, the trees here too crowded. The three of them slow. Turning around themselves. James tries to hear, to smell, but there's nothing.

Wrong.

Wrong.

Wrong.

It happens so fast. One minute they're lost and the next Moony is coming through the trees. James has never felt afraid of him, not really, but this time...he goes right for Padfoot. The pair tumble to the ground a few feet away and the noise—Sirius whines in a way that James has never heard before and his heart stops.

He's barely thinking as he charges after them, Peter squealing behind him. One well aimed kick gets Moony off of Sirius—it's too hard, he knows it is, but he's panicking. And Sirius doesn't get up. The wolf comes at them again—except he isn't coming for them. He's coming for *Padfoot*. This time James rises up onto his hind legs and throws his front feet heavily into the wolf's chest, knocking him backwards and into one of the trees behind him.

Fuck.

Fuck, Remus. Fuck.

James turns back to Sirius. He doesn't know what to *do*. He can't transform, not yet, not with Moony right behind him, but he's fucking useless as a stag. He moves forward, and sees the slow rise and fall of the dog's chest, blood catching in the moonlight. He nudges him as gently as he can, Peter running mad laps around the both of them. Padfoot groans, and then, slowly, pulls himself up.

James almost cries—though he's not sure what that would look like as a stag. He needs to know if Sirius is okay but there's no fucking way to ask and then, as if he's heard James's thoughts, Sirius comes forward and gives him a lick. James laughs and it comes out as a heavy breath through his nose.

They turn back towards Moony, sitting still where he hit the ground, curled in on himself, licking his wounds. He growls when he notices them watching. There's a small tug at James's leg and he looks back down at Padfoot. The dog holds his gaze for a moment before nodding his head in the direction of the shack.

He wants to go back.

He's been hurt, and clearly Moony is riled up for some reason. It makes sense, but James's chest still aches a little at the thought. They've never split up on a full moon before. He dips

his head slowly so Padfoot knows he understands, and without pausing the black dog slinks off into the woods, limping more than James is comfortable with. Part of him wants to follow, but it's too early and he can't leave Moony alone.

So he tears his eyes away from the spot where Padfoot disappeared and takes his place beside the wolf.

"Shit Sirius," James slips out from under Remus's arm as they enter the bedroom in the shrieking shack. Sirius is sitting against the wall, the side of his shirt drenched in blood.

"It's not as bad as it looks," he says, voice rough around the edges.

James picks up his wand and kneels beside him while Peter takes Remus's unconscious body the rest of the way to the mattress.

"How is he?" Sirius asks, while James lifts up his shirt to get a better look at his injuries.

James grimaces. "He's had easier nights. At least he's bleeding less than you." He holds his wand over Sirius but pauses before he casts, catching his friend's eye. "I only know episkey," he says apologetically.

Sirius half-coughs, half-laughs. "Well, go on then, see what it does."

James flicks his wand and watches as the three deep gashes across Sirius's side grow slightly smaller. "Shit," he hisses under his breath, trying the spell again only to accomplish even less.

"That's all I've got."

"Here," Peter comes up behind them, sweating from having carried Remus back to the shack—they hadn't been sure it was a good idea to bring the wolf around Sirius again. Just incase.

Peter nudges James out of the way before taking his place.

Sirius raises his brow. "You know what you're doing Pete?"

He rolls his eyes. "I know at least as much as James."

Sirius smiles. "Fair enough."

Peter's face screws up in concentration as he raises his wand, "Ferula." Bandages shoot out of his wand and wrap around Sirius's side—from his under arm to his hip.

"Nice one," James slaps Peter on the back. "Where'd you learn that?"

"Remus, 'course," he says, clearly trying to hide how pleased he is to get James's praise.

"Where do I learn anything?"

As if on cue, Remus groans, drawing all their attention back to him.

“How long do you reckon we have until Pomfrey gets here?” Sirius asks, as he pulls his bloody shirt back down. James is already across the room, Pete’s thrown an old blanket across Remus’s body but James pulls it back to get a look at his chest and hisses. It’s already turning blue, bruised all down the front.

“Hey Peter,” he whispers, instead of answering Sirius’s question. “Remus teach you anymore of those nifty healing spells?”

Peter comes to hover over his shoulder, staring down bleakly at their friend before shaking his head. James sighs, dropping the blanket just as Remus’s eyes start to flutter open. He gasps like he’s coming up for air, struggling at first, and James places a steady hand on his shoulder to keep him from falling onto the floor.

“Easy, easy,” he murmurs. Remus’s breathing starts to even out but his eyes stay wide and frantic. There’s a moment of calm when he finds James, but it only lasts a second before his eyes are traveling down to the blood on James’s hands. *Fuck*, he should have wiped that off.

“What—“ but he winces when he tries to speak, his chest hitching, causing a new wave of guilt to wash over James.

“Sorry,” James says. “I—you were a little...” he doesn’t know how to explain in a way that won’t make Remus feel worse.

“Angry,” Peter supplies from behind him, which is as good a description as any James supposes.

Somehow Remus’s eyes grow wider. “D-did I hurt you?” and then, panicked: “Sirius? Where’s-”

“I’m here,” Sirius pops up, without giving any hint that his entire left side has been mauled. James almost laughs when he sees that Sirius has wrapped the invisibility cloak around his shoulders, hiding his bloody torso. *Thank Merlin*.

Remus’s eyes are bright with tears. “You’re okay?”

And James doesn’t know if the question is directed at all of them or just Sirius, doesn’t know if Remus remembers any of what happened—he doesn’t usually. Either way, Sirius smiles, bless him.

“We’re okay, Moony.”

Before anymore can pass between them there is the distinct noise of a door opening.

“Shit,” James gets to his feet as Peter quickly shrinks himself back into a rat. “We’ll see you soon, alright Remus?” he says, as Sirius lets him under the cloak. It doesn’t escape his notice that Remus’s eyes are trained on his bloody hands until the moment they disappear.

They're quiet when they get back to the dorm room, the dim blue light of the early morning filling up the space. James chucks the invisibility cloak into the corner and heads straight for the bathroom, he tries not to think about what he's washing away as the pink water swirls down the drain.

When he walks back into the room Sirius is inspecting his wounds in front of the mirror, Peter face down on his bed. James pauses, breath hitching again at the sight of Sirius's bloody side, at the knowledge that it could have been so much worse. Sirius's eyes meet his and James tries to keep his expression blank. Sometimes he wonders what Sirius's body would look like, if he couldn't magic away all his scars. "You gonna be able to get those bandages back on?" he asks eventually, unable to say any of what he wants to.

"Peter will do me again, won't you Pete?"

An indistinct noise comes from Peter as he speaks into his bedding. James huffs out a laugh, sitting on the end of his own bed. He considers lying down but he knows if he does he won't be able to get back up again.

"How long do we have until breakfast?" he asks, too lazy to check himself.

"Not long—fifteen minutes tops," Sirius answers as he starts looking around for a new shirt. Much to Remus's dismay, Sirius has never learned how to use a wardrobe. James's eyes find his bloodied clothes thrown over his headboard.

"Oi, get rid of those before Moony comes back," he says, earning him an indignant grumble as Sirius finishes pulling a clean jumper over his head. Well, relatively clean.

"I'm not an idiot you know," he says as walks towards his bed, tying his hair back.

James is too tired to snap back, dropping his head into his hands and wondering how many points McGonagall will dock him if he skives off transfigurations this morning.

"He was so angry."

It's the tone that makes James look up—Sirius has suddenly gone quiet, standing at the head of his bed with the bloody shirt between his hands.

"I don't know what I did."

James's throat feels tight. "We don't...it could have been random." But for some reason, he can't quite make himself believe it.

"Dunno," Pete chimes in, having flipped himself onto his back, "felt pretty Padfoot focused, didn't it?"

James glares at him. "Yes. Thanks Pete. Real helpful."

"He's right though," Sirius says, before the two of them can start bickering. He's still looking down at the shirt in his hands. "Fuck, I really don't know what I did."

None of them speak for a while. James watches Sirius nervously, foot tapping against the ground. He really needs to fucking fly—just to get rid of the adrenaline still coursing through his veins. He keeps hearing it—Sirius’s whine. Keeps feeling the way his breath stuttered. He’d thought—for a second there he’d really thought...

“C’mon,” he forces himself to say, pushing to his feet. His whole body protests, begging him to lie down. “Let’s go before the great hall gets too crowded.”

Peter groans as he slides reluctantly off his bed and makes for the door, but Sirius doesn’t move.

“Hey,” James says softly, stepping closer and squeezing Sirius’s shoulder. “Don’t worry about it too much, yeah? Remus loves you.”

He sees the muscles in Sirius’s jaw tense before he breathes out, nodding his head. “Yeah.”

He incinerates the shirt in his hands so quickly that by the time James realizes what’s happened Sirius is already out the door.

The marauders have been sneaking breakfast up to the infirmary every morning after the full moon since about half-way through first year—before they even fully understood what was going on.

At first they would come in under the invisibility cloak, but they gave up on that pretty quick. They never could keep quiet once they were all together, and it was a while before any of them could cast a muffliato strong enough to make a difference. Pomfrey’s just accepted it at this point. Secretly, James thinks she’s glad. Glad that Remus isn’t alone. She’s not nearly as scary as she pretends to be.

“Morning Poppy,” Sirius says cheerily, two levitating plates stacked high with breakfast carnage following him into the infirmary.

“Mr. Black,” she says wearily, the large room is empty except for one bed with the curtains drawn around it. “Quiet if you please, he hasn’t gotten up yet.”

Sirius sends James a nervous look over his shoulder. That’s unusual. Remus is usually itching to get to class by now.

“How is he?” James finds himself asking. What’s wrong with Remus is another thing that has become quietly accepted between them. Technically, she doesn’t know that they *know* but... well, she’s not an idiot.

Her face is grim. “He’s in bad shape, the worst it’s been in a while—few fractured ribs, cracked clavicle, bad bruising.”

James flinches, vividly remembering the feel of the wolf under his feet.

“How long until he gets out?” Sirius asks, when James can’t quite manage to get his tongue working again.

“At least not until tonight—I’d like to keep him until tomorrow morning but I think he might bite my head off if I suggest it.” There’s a beat of silence before she breaks it by nodding toward his bed. “Go on, see if you can get him to eat something. But be gentle with him this morning.”

“Yes m’am,” Sirius gives her a salute, but the grin on his face feels forced.

James is only a little surprised when they pull back the curtain and find Remus sitting upright in bed, an expectant look on his face. Clearly he’d been waiting for them—no doubt pretending to be asleep so Pomfrey wouldn’t fuss.

He looks pale and young in his blue pyjamas. There are dark rings under his eyes, and new scrapes across his face.

“Hey Remus,” Peter manages to sound casual as he pulls up a chair. James does the same on his other side while Sirius sits at the foot of the bed.

“Got all your favourites,” Sirius lowers the plate onto Remus’s lap but he barely looks at it.

“Not hungry,” he mumbles, putting onto the bedside table. The three of them exchange a quick glance.

“Come on Remus,” Peter nudges, gripping his own plate a little too tightly. “Not even the bacon?”

Remus only shakes his head—the gesture is sharp, pointed. He turns to James. “What happened?”

James looks back at him and then down at his plate, pushing his eggs around for a moment, just to buy him some time. “Nothing really—“

“*James.*”

James grimaces, forcing himself to look up again. “Well...” he starts, swallowing, his throat suddenly feels like sandpaper. “I’m not really sure, to be honest.”

“Your hands,” Remus is practically whispering now, eyes the size of James’s plate. “Your hands were covered in blood. So I need you to tell me what happened. I need you to tell me the truth. And I need you to tell me now.” There is no arguing with that tone of voice.

James nods, exhaling tightly. “Yeah, okay Moony,” he puts his own breakfast aside, running a hand through his hair—nervous tick. “Listen, it’s like Pete said. You—you got a bit angry.”

Remus visibly swallows. “Angry,” he repeats. “You said I didn’t hurt you?”

“You didn’t,” he can’t think of any way to make this better. To keep Remus from bleeding over this. “You—it—“ his eyes flick nervously to Sirius and then back. That’s enough for

Remus though. He should have known better.

Remus whips his head around, somehow growing paler. “I hurt *you*?”

Sirius smiles. Too big and too bright, but god James loves him for trying. “Barely. No offence Moony, but you’re a bit of a shit werewolf.”

“To be fair, he does have a disadvantage,” James chimes in.

Sirius arches his brow. “How d’you figure that?”

“Hard to be afraid of a bloke once you know how he folds his pants.”

Sirius barks so loud that James half expects him to turn back into Padfoot. “Quite right,” he wheezes.

“I hurt you?” Remus’s voice cuts through the room like a sharp knife. All brevity sucked out of the air. The look of horror hasn’t left his face, his eyes pleading.

“Remus,” Sirius says eventually, surprisingly soft. “I’m alright, look,” he spreads his arms out wide, managing a grin.

“I—“ but the words don’t quite make it out of Remus’s mouth, he opens it and closes it several times before giving up.

James can see the small hitches in his shoulders, like his breath is getting caught in his throat. It reminds him of the way he gets before his skin splits open and the wolf slides out.

“*Hey*,” Sirius moves so that he’s right in front of him, hands on his shoulders. “Remus—Remus? Look at me okay? Breathe with me, in and out.” Sirius inhales slowly, counts to three and then exhales. “Come on Moons,” his eyes are intent, never wavering. “With me okay? In,” *one, two three*. “Out,” *one two three*. Slowly, Remus’s breaths get longer, until eventually he matches Sirius exactly. None of them speak for a while, just listening to each other breathe.

“You alright?” Sirius asks eventually, breaking them all out of whatever trance they’d fallen into, hands still on Remus’s shoulders.

Remus nods. “Fuck Sirius, I’m so—I’m so sorry. I don’t—“

“Hey,” Sirius holds up one of his hands to stop him. “You don’t have to apologize. Really, I mean it, cross my heart and hope James dies.”

“Oi!”

Sirius smirks at him over Remus’s head as the blond boy lets out a breath that might be close to a laugh.

“Okay?”

But Remus doesn't answer right away, and James sees his hands fisted in the sheets, nails digging into his palms.

"Sirius—"

"I mean it, I'm fine. Aren't I Prongs?"

"Bit of a prat, but other than that, yeah, tip-top," James grins in a way that he hopes betrays none of the anxiety still swirling in his chest.

"See?" Sirius says emphatically. "Peter agrees too, don't you Pete?"

Peter nods vigorously. "Yup. Uh-huh. Definitely a prat."

Sirius reaches over to swat his head, but Peter is too fast, snickering as he ducks out of the way.

Remus is shaking his head, scrubbing at his face with his hands. "You're all idiots," but his voice sounds thick and not nearly as biting as he, no doubt, intends it to.

"Can't argue with that," Sirius says.

"It is a very accurate assessment," James agrees.

Remus drops his hands, sniffing a little even though his eyes are dry. "Okay."

Sirius arches his brow. "Okay?"

Remus just nods, looking incredibly tired as he drops back against his pillows.

"Excellent," Sirius beams, trying too hard. James hopes that Remus is too tired to notice, but he doubts it. "Now we can get back to breakfast!"

"I'm really not—" but the plate of food has already been levitated from the bedside table back to Remus's lap. He rolls his eyes but doesn't bother fighting it, picking rather unenthusiastically at a piece of toast.

The pause in conversation allows James to realize how tired he himself is, nearly choking on his eggs as he tries to swallow and yawn at the same time. Judging by the light coming in through the windows they haven't got much time before transfiguration and James thinks again about skipping.

"Do you reckon it was maybe because of our little tiff in the dorm room?" Sirius says suddenly, causing everyone to start.

He isn't looking at them, eyes very determinedly on his breakfast, tone very determinedly casual. James groans internally. He really wants to do this now? *Now?* They only just managed to get Remus to let up on himself.

“Do I—what?” Remus stutters, dropping the piece of bacon that had been on its way to his mouth.

Sirius shrugs, chewing thoughtfully. “I just wondered, y’know, if maybe you were hacked off at me in Moony form cause you were hacked off at me in Remus form?”

Remus blinks and James fights the urge to smack the back of Sirius’s head.

“I—I’m not mad at you Sirius,” Remus says finally, carefully.

“But you were a bit, yeah? About me being too protective or whatever,” he waves his hands about flippantly. “I just wonder if that’s why Moony was pissed at me too?”

Something flickers across Remus’s face for just a second before he shuts it down. He’s good at that, bottling things up. James probably would have missed it except he’s seen him make that exact expression before—in the common room, before they’d walked down to the infirmary. Just...unbearable sadness.

It takes James’s brain a second.

“Yeah,” Remus says slowly. “Yeah maybe.”

But then...

“You reckon?”

Remus nods. “Yeah, must be. But I’m not—I wasn’t really—“

James looks between his two friends.

Remus sighs, pinching the bridge of his nose. “What I’m trying to say, is I’m not mad. Not anymore, okay?”

Sirius grins. “Good. That’s good.”

It makes sense, James thinks pityingly, as he watches his friend turn back to his breakfast, unsure of how he didn’t see it before. Of course, Remus was angry.

He fancies Mary.

Chapter End Notes

Hey-o! Thank you guys so much for the commented recs on the last chapter, it was very much appreciated!

I wish I was the type of person who could be like "This fic will update on __ day" but I would be lying to you all because I keep no schedules. But hopefully frequently, I have

plans!

A lot happens in this chapter so I'd love to know what you think!

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

James is just trying his best - an accurate summary of this whole fic if I'm being honest.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

James feels like he knows what muggles mean when they say the word “magic.” They don’t mean spells or wands or cauldrons—well, okay, yes, sometimes they do. But in those moments when the word slips out of them, all quiet and reverent, like they can’t help it, that’s something different. James knows that, because it’s how he feels when he’s flying.

Magic.

The sun is only just rising above the horizon, and even in his leather playing gloves James’s hands are still half-frozen to his broom. The warm dawn light reaches across the Great Lake towards him like fingers, the air crisp and sweet the way it only gets in the fall.

“Mother fuc—“

James misses the rest of the curse as he snatches the quaffle out of Macdonald’s hands and zips off down the pitch towards the opposite goal. Prewett and Abbott put up a good defence but James is in top form this morning. They can barely touch him.

He grins as he watches the ball sail through the middle hoop, out of breath in the best way.

“You’re obsessed, you know that?”

James pulls his broom around to meet Sirius who’s floating lazily behind him, beaters’s club across his shoulders, arms resting on top—like he can’t be bothered.

“Please, you love it as much as I do,” James tries and fails to push the sweaty hair out of his face.

“Not at seven in the morning I don’t, we don’t even have anyone to impress,” he nods towards the empty stands.

James rolls his eyes. “Like you aren’t showing off for Macdonald.”

“I’ll have you know Mary and my’s relationship has far surpassed such childish games.”

“Uh huh.”

Sirius smirks. "Don't worry Jamie, one day you'll meet a girl with eyesight as bad as yours and then you'll know what I'm talking about."

"Oi!" he tries to punch Sirius's shoulder but the prat swerves out of the way, cackling. "For your information there are plenty of girls who think I'm well fit."

"Really?" Sirius asks, amused. "You'll have to introduce me to them sometime."

"Okay, you know what-"

"BLACK, POTTER, STOP FLIRTING AND GET YOUR ASSES DOWN HERE!"

They both peer over their brooms at the ground where a very small, and very angry looking Frank Longbottom is glaring up at them. Well, they assume he's glaring, the details of his face are a little blurry at this height.

"You think he wants use to go down there?" Sirius asks lightly.

"Hard to tell," James muses, "he's not being very clear."

"So obtuse, our Frank."

"Always speaking in riddles."

"Though," Sirius adds thoughtfully, looking around. "It does appear that everyone else has gone."

"And if they all jumped off a cliff would you do it too?" James does his best impression of his mother and is glad to see Sirius struggling to hold it together.

"Might," he shrugs, "depends on the day, really."

"I WILL KICK YOU BOTH OFF THIS TEAM SO HELP ME GOD."

Sirius lets out a dramatic sigh. "That really can't be good for him."

"And he has such a lovely singing voice," James agrees. "I suppose we could go down."

"For his sake."

James nods in agreement, meeting Sirius's eye and grinning. "We're nothing if not considerate."

Frank makes a point of not looking or speaking to either of them when they finally land down on the pitch, choosing, instead, to aggressively gather the rest of the straying team back together. They form a rather grumbly half-circle around him.

"Prewett—"

"Just call me Alice, Frank. Honestly, we've been dating for two years."

“Not on the pitch Prewett.”

Alice arches her brow. “Oh really? If memory serves, we were dating on the pitch last Friday night.”

Sirius snorts, earning him a pointed glare from a very red faced Frank. “Right. Fine. Pre—*Alice*.”

She smiles brightly at him.

“Your defence is weak, you and Abbott are leaving the centre wide open. Stop making the first move, you gotta play hard to get with your chasers. And communicate with each other.”

“Aye aye captain, no more fucking the chasers on the first date.”

Frank looks in danger of exploding.

“*God*,” Sirius whispers to James. “I think I’m in love.”

“She’s taken Black,” Frank snaps at him, running a hand over his very flustered face. “So don’t even think about it.”

Alice winks at Sirius across the circle and Sirius fake swoons into James’s arms. “Ugh, you’re heavy,” James huffs, pushing a laughing Sirius back to his feet.

“Macdonald,” Frank redirects his focus, very determinedly not looking at either Sirius or Alice, “you’ve gotta make sure not to get too cocky. You thought you were home free and you stopped watching your sides. Potter snatched that quaffle off of you practically mid-goal.”

“Yeah, yeah, I’d like to see him try it when I’m not half-asleep on my broom.”

“Name the time and place Macdonald,” James grins, earning him a rude hand gesture in return.

“McKinnon, Black, that was a good practice, but Sirius—“

“Oh, *he* gets a first name,” Alice says, mockingly.

“Yeah well, you should have seen the things *we* did on the pitch last Friday,” Sirius waggles his eyebrows suggestively and Alice looks like someone’s just told her it’s Christmas morning.

“Enough,” Frank interjects quickly, holding his hands out like he can shove the innuendos back down their throats. The pair of them are far too pleased with themselves. “Black,” Frank says through clenched teeth, “don’t drop your club, I want you in a prepared position at all times, understood?”

“Got it captain, no more fucking the chasers on the first date,” he winks at Mary.

Frank truly looks like he's on the verge of some kind of breakdown. "Forget it, I give up, you lot are a bunch of heathens."

"Aw, but Frank," Marlene says cutely, batting her lashes and swinging her shoulders, "we're your heathens."

He gives her a flat stare. "Get out of here. All of you. But be back tomorrow, and be on bloody time!" This last comment is directed specifically at Sirius who gives Frank a salute as James pulls him towards the changerooms before he can get himself murdered.

Twenty minutes, and several towel whippings later, James and Sirius are making their way back up to the castle, Mary and Marlene promising to catch up with them later. They always take ages getting ready after practice, but Sirius isn't much better. James reckons he'd still be standing in front of the mirror coiffing his hair if it weren't for him.

"Merlin, did you swallow a wild animal or something?" Sirius laughs, as James's stomach lets out a particularly obscene growl.

"Listen, it's not my fault Frank has us running drills before the house elves are up."

"I'm sorry," Sirius looks far too amused, "is James Fleamont Potter actually complaining about quidditch practice?"

"No I'm not, you twat," giving Sirius a shove which only seems to delight him more. There's no winning with him. There really isn't. "But I *am* saying that we need to remember to raid the kitchens tonight so I can have some fuel in the morning."

Sirius makes an exaggerated retching noise. "Fuel? Did you just call food FUEL? Mate, you've been spending too much time with Frank. You little quidditch psycho."

"Oh shut it," James knocks his shoulder into Sirius who laughs, the noise echoing around them as they walk into the still sleepy castle.

"Listen, I'll catch up with you later, yeah?" Sirius claps him on the back as he starts to pull away.

"Catch up with me later? What are you ditching me to shag Macdonald already? It's not even noon!"

Sirius grins. "I want you to know, that if Mary was up for it, I one hundred percent would do that."

"No bloody loyalty," James grumbles, only half joking.

"But, as it happens," Sirius talks over his complaining. "I'm actually posting a letter."

That catches James's attention. With all the marauders at Hogwarts and Sirius's family being...well, his family, Sirius doesn't get much post.

“Oh?” James asks, desperate to pry but doing his best not to.

Sirius rolls his eyes, still smiling. “It’s to my uncle you nosey bugger.” That clarifies exactly nothing, and Sirius must realize it because after a brief pause he pushes on, a little more sincere now. “My uncle Alphard, he wrote me first week back. I guess he heard through the family gossip network about my...departure.”

James nods slowly, not entirely clear on what kind of story this is going to turn out to be. Besides, years of knowing Sirius has taught him when to push and when to wait.

“I’ve only met him a few times, nice guy, quiet,” he trails off for a moment, fingers fiddling with the sleeve of his robes. “Anyway he—he said he wanted to reach out. Make sure I was okay, said he was proud of me.” Sirius ducks his head a bit, embarrassed. He can boast and brag all day, but give him a genuine compliment and he has no idea how to handle it.

“That’s...” James searches for the words, “nice and...unexpected.”

Sirius laughs, hand rubbing at the back of his neck. “Yeah, tell me about it. Anyway, I’ve kinda been writing to him a bit. It—not that I minded, cutting them off, I didn’t.”

“I know,” James says quickly, trying to soothe the defensive tone in Sirius’s voice.

His friend nods, expression thoughtful, eyes not quite meeting James’s stare. “But it—it’s comforting I guess, knowing not every member of my family wants me dead,” he tries for brevity and fails, but James offers him a weak smile anyway.

“That’s good Pads, I’m happy for you.”

Sirius looks up finally. “Yeah—it—yeah, thanks. He’s got wicked taste in music too, for an old man. Says he’s gonna send me some muggle records.”

James arches his brow. “Your uncle listens to muggle music?”

“I know right? What a trip. I think he’s secretly a bit of a rebel.”

“No shit.”

There’s a moment of awkward silence before Sirius nods, seemingly to himself. “Well, I’m gonna...” he starts walking away backwards, gesturing in the direction of the owlery.

“Yeah, right, see you later then.”

He watches his best friend disappear up the stairs, feeling a little dazed by the whole conversation. He’s happy for Sirius, he is. But he’s also...worried. The Blacks are, well, unpredictable at the best of times. And Sirius barely even knows this guy. What if he turns out to be as bad as the rest of them? What if he’s worse?

They’re not all bad, says the annoying voice in the back of his head, *Regulus is—*

He stops that thought in its tracks, a little irritated with himself for having it in the first place. One moderately okay conversation doesn't change anything. Doesn't all of a sudden make Regulus a good person.

But what did he do to make you think he was so bad in the first place?

That's it.

James has had enough of talking to himself. He does not have to engage with the stupid thoughts in his stupid head if he doesn't want to. He starts walking determinedly in the direction of the great hall. After all, nothing shuts up introspection quite like bacon.

"Jesus do they have to—" Remus cuts himself off, grumbling something else that James doesn't quite catch.

He looks up, first at Moony, who is currently staring down at the parchment in front of him like it just insulted his mother, and then over at the stacks where Sirius is devouring Mary's face.

James squints, tilting his head slightly. "D'you think they can breathe like that?"

Remus makes an indignant noise that reminds James of why he stopped doing his Ancient Ruins readings in the first place. He looks back at his friend pityingly. Typical of Sirius to go for the bird Remus fancies and then insist on snogging her in front of him on a near daily basis.

"Listen, Moony," he pauses, checking to make sure there's no one around and then lowering his voice. "If you just tell Sirius that, *you know*, if you tell him how you feel—"

Remus's head pops up so quickly that James quite literally chokes on his words.

"W-what did you just say?" Remus's eyes are big with the kind of fear that usually only makes an appearance around the full moon.

"Woah, calm down. It's not a big deal," for whatever reason this does not seem to help matters. "I was just saying—I just think, if you tell him, you know, the truth, he'll quit shoving it down your throat."

He knows that Remus is a private person but this, this seems—I mean, James knows he's a bloody werewolf for fuck's sake. Why is he getting so jumpy about a crush?

"He won't mind Moons, honestly, it's not like you can help it. Besides, Pads and Mary are about the two most casual people I know, it's not like this means you're never going to get a chance to shoot your shot..." James trails off as it becomes apparent that nothing he is saying is doing anything to dampen the fear in Remus's eyes.

"H-how do you, how do you know?"

James blinks, thoroughly regretting this entire conversation. “Uh—I don’t know, just the way you looked, in the common room.”

“In the common room?” Remus repeats, voice fragile.

“Yeah, on the full moon.”

Remus winces, that night is still a sore subject. Remus has mentioned once or twice that he thinks the marauders should sit out the next one, just to be safe. This idea has been unanimously shot down, of course.

“Remus, it’s really not—“

“*James*,” his voice is strained and instantly shuts James up. “Please, please don’t tell him.”

“He won’t—“

“I’m asking you as my friend, just—just please, please, please, please.”

It hurts, Remus’s voice hurts, and James has no idea why. This isn’t at all how he thought this conversation would go. Part of him aches that this is how Remus feels about this—how Remus feels full stop. In the dark. On his own. Always hiding. And he wants him to know that he doesn’t have to, that he’s been told his whole life to keep things behind closed doors but it doesn’t have to be that way.

But Remus just keeps looking at him like he’s getting ready to bolt and even James has the good sense to know that this is not the time for that conversation.

“Yeah Remus, I promise, of course.”

Remus swallows with difficulty, his next exhale shaky. “Thank you.”

He doesn’t look at James, instead he starts packing up his books.

“Hey wait, Moons, you don’t have to—“

“It’s fine,” he says, stuffing parchment messily into the canvas bag over his shoulder. “I’m just tired,” he turns away, nearly bulldozing into Marlene in his rush to escape.

James sighs, leaning back in his chair and passing a hand over his face. “Fuck,” he hisses under his breath.

“He was sure in a rush,” Marlene slides into Remus’s now vacant seat across from him.

“Yeah,” James says, shooting a weary look at the door. “It’s possible I just said the wrong thing.”

Marlene gasps. “What? You? James Potter, the king of tact?”

“Har, har, har. Hilarious.”

She smiles. "I am, thanks for noticing."

James lets out a breath that's almost a laugh, dropping his gaze back down to his Ruins homework. He feels like he ought to go after Remus but he's not entirely sure that he knows how to make this better. Or even that he knows what happened in the first place.

"Gosh, they're really going at it aren't they?"

James looks up. "What—oh," he follows her gaze to the still very much entangled Mary and Sirius. "Yeah well, you know them. Are they really here if no one's watching?"

Marlene snorts. "True," her gaze comes back to him and it looks like all kinds of trouble. "Speaking of embarrassing displays of affection."

"Um, is that what we were talking about?"

"I've noticed you've quit making a spectacle out of yourself in front of Lily recently."

James lets out an irritated huff, scowling at her across the table. "I wish people would stop bringing that up, it's not a big deal."

"It's kind of a big deal."

"Besides," James presses on, "it's no one's business."

Marlene laughs. "Oh come on James, you've made this everyone's business."

"Have not."

She sends him a flat look but he doesn't budge, leaning back in his chair and crossing his arms over his chest.

"Really? What about in third year when you charmed all the pumpkins at the Halloween feast to sing love ballads to her?"

"That was—I—okay, maybe that was a little public. But I only did it once."

She raises a disbelieving eyebrow. "There was also second year, when you made a pink cloud follow her around all Valentine's Day raining petals."

"Well—"

"And last year, when you filled the Gryffindor common room with about a thousand lilies before serenading her in front of everyone."

James bites down on the inside of his cheek as he feels the heat rising in his face.

"Or in—"

"Yes okay, I get it, thank you!" James cuts her off, shoving an aggravated hand through his hair. Marlene looks at him smugly from across the table.

“I was a right git.”

“Yes,” she nods, too amused for James’s liking, “you were.”

“I’m trying to be—“ he struggles for a minute, “better.”

“That’s good,” a moment passes before she leans forward across the table, “So who is she then?”

James blinks. “Who’s who?”

Marlene rolls her eyes. “The girl that’s distracted you from Lily.”

James is genuinely at a loss for words—which rarely happens. He splutters for a moment, gawking at her. “I—there’s no girl,” and then, realizing what he’s just said, back pedals. “I mean, there *have* been girls, obviously.”

“Obviously,” Marlene repeats mockingly. James chooses to ignore her.

“But there’s no other girl,” he sighs, collapsing a little. “Just Evans.” There will always be Lily Evans.

Marlene eyes him curiously for a minute before shaking her head. “I don’t buy it.”

“Don’t buy what?”

She waves her hand. “You, James Potter, are a romantic. There is no way you would just give up on Lily without someone else to expend your woo-ing energy on.”

“Okay, first off, who said anything about giving up on Lily? I have not given up. Secondly, woo-ing energy?” James wrinkles his nose. “Really McKinnon?”

She laughs, it’s a nice sound, Marlene’s laugh, bright and warm. The kind that makes you feel like you’re exactly where you’re supposed to be. “Alright, alright not my best, but the point still stands.”

James looks at her flatly. “Oh sorry, you had a point?”

But the mischief hasn’t left her eyes. “I’ll figure it out, you know.”

James sighs dramatically. “Yeah well, when you do let me know. I’d really like to be aware of who I’m wooing.”

She opens her mouth to speak when another voice cuts her off:

“Mar?”

James feels his heart flip. He always does when she’s close, has since he was eleven. You’d think he’d get used to it at some point, or build up some kind of immunity. But it’s always the

same—always feels like the first time—like he’s never going to remember how to breathe again.

“Ready to go?” Lily stops beside Marlene’s chair, barely looking at James.

Which is okay. Completely fine. James bites down on his tongue and forces himself to turn back to his coursework, holding in the numerous desperate and embarrassing things he wants to say.

Like, you’re beautiful.

So beautiful I can’t stand it.

You make me feel too big for my skin.

Like staring into the sun.

You’re melting my wings.

He has no desire to see what Marlene’s expression is doing right now. Some mate she is, couldn’t even give him a heads up that she was waiting for Lily.

“Potter?”

James blinks at the sound of his name being spoken by Lily’s voice.

Carefully, he looks up.

“She asked how you are James,” Marlene says after a few more seconds of silence pass.

“Oh,” James says, which is a ridiculous response, so his brain quickly tries to remedy the situation by adding: “I’m doing Ruins readings.”

Marlene looks like holding in her laughter is physically painful, while Lily just looks confused.

“Er—right—Marlene, should we g—“

“What about—how—you?” *Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.* “I mean...alright, Evans?”

The confusion on Lily’s face does not dissipate and James prays to the soul of Godric Gryffindor for the floor to open up and swallow him whole.

“I’m fine,” she says wearily, before sending a pointed look at Marlene. “Lets go?”

Marlene nods, shoulders shaking with laughter. “See you at practice James?”

James does his best to channel Sirius when he glares back at her. “*Yup.* You sure will.”

She at least has the good grace to look frightened by that.

He watches them leave—pathetically. He watches Lily’s hair, so long now it’s nearly passed her waist, watches the way her mouth flicks into a sharp grin. Her eyes bright and trained on Marlene, giving her the attention James would kill for.

And just as they cross the threshold, moving out of sight, he hears her say: “What’s his problem anyway?”

He hasn’t been sleeping well since the full moon. He closes his eyes and he’s back in the forest. He can’t see, but he hears Sirius screaming. He fumbles around in the dark until his hands touch something warm and sticky that smells like iron. Then he wakes up.

Every time he feels like something in his chest is caving in, his hands and legs shaking as he resists the urge to rip back the curtains around Sirius’s bed and make sure he’s okay. Make sure Moony didn’t turn him inside out. That he got there in time.

It’s stupid.

He’s too old for nightmares.

With a huff James turns onto his side, the steady breathing of his roommates letting him know they’re all asleep. He punches his pillow, lays back down, stares up at the canopy over his head. He counts centaurs like he used to do when he was little. He recites the ingredients to the Alihosty Draught they learned in potions this week. He imagines he’s flying. None of it works.

Eventually he gives up, pulling his legs over the side of the bed and scrubbing at his face. He could go down to the common room and try and get some work done, or maybe sneak into the kitchens - do they ward off the quidditch pitch after curfew? James reaches carefully into the drawer of his bedside table and pulls out the map. Maybe once he figures out where Filch is patrolling he’ll have a better idea of what to do.

Except Filch’s name isn’t the one that catches his eye.

The map unfolds in his lap and almost instantly he sees it—all alone in the Astronomy Tower. *Regulus Black*. James blinks, double checking that he isn’t making it up.

“Nutter,” he mutters under his breath, but he doesn’t take his eyes off the name. He’s probably up there yelling at the sky again, though why he’s doing it at two-thirty in the morning James can’t fathom.

A few more minutes pass before he sighs. “Fuck it.”

He shoves his feet into his trainers, not bothering with the invisibility cloak as he throws a grey jumper over his bare torso. He checks the map periodically as he moves through the halls but Filch is on the otherside of the castle and Mrs. Norris appears to be outside doing who-knows-what. He takes the stairs to the top of the Astronomy Tower two at a time, tapping the map closed when he reaches the door at the top.

For a second he wavers, wondering if this is really the best idea. But then, that's never stopped him before. He shoves the map into the waistband of his trousers and gently opens the door.

Regulus is standing in front of his telescope just like he had been the last time. Engrossed enough that he somehow doesn't hear the door. Alastor Moody invades James's thoughts long enough to shout "CONSTANT VIGILANCE" at the back of Regulus's head. He bites the inside of this mouth to keep from laughing.

Unlike James, Regulus is not in his pyjamas, but instead a pair of formal looking trousers and a button down, his robes discarded in a pile by his feet. James leans back against the wall behind him and watches as Regulus's fingers meticulously work the knobs of the lens.

"Okay I give up, what are you doing?"

Regulus whips around, drawing his wand without a second thought and pointing it right at the centre of James's chest. Maybe him and Moody would get along after all.

James raises his hands in surrender. "On edge much?"

Regulus only glares. "What the fuck are you doing here?"

"Couldn't sleep."

"So you came to the Astronomy Tower?"

"You sound awfully judge-y for someone who is also in the Astronomy Tower."

The glaring intensifies.

James nods at Regulus's wand. "You going to lower that thing?"

"Haven't decided," the younger boy bites out.

"Well, let me know when you do, yeah?" James steps around him and up to the neglected telescope, completely ignoring Regulus's raised wand. He bends down, shutting one of his eyes and peering through the lens. A grouping of stars blink back at him. For some reason he thought he would understand better, once he saw what Regulus was looking at. But he doesn't. He's always been crap at astronomy.

"Bit late for star gazing 'innit?" he says as he straightens up.

Regulus is still standing behind him, tense and sharp looking, but his wand has been put away so James counts that as a win. He really didn't fancy getting hexed tonight.

"I'm sorry, is there something I can help you with?"

The words are icy and James can't help but remember himself saying them not too long ago, in a cramped train compartment.

“Not really,” he tries to shrug off the weird feeling that memory casts over him. “Told you, can’t sleep.” He moves towards the railing, sitting down on the ledge and facing Regulus. “So what’s with the telescope?”

He can see Regulus grinding his teeth, hands in fists at his sides. “Listen Potter, I’m not sure if our little conversation the other day gave you the wrong impression, but you and I are not friends.”

James leans back, draping his arms over the railing. “Never said we were.”

“Then what,” he waves his hand pointedly in James’s direction, “are you doing?”

James arches his brow, holding back a smirk. “Pretty sure I asked you first.”

Regulus just stares at him for a solid minute before shaking his head. “Salazar, you’re just like him, you know that? Fucking arrogant assholes—“

“Woah, woah,” James interrupts, laughing because he can only assume that the “he” being referred to, is Sirius. “All I did was ask what you were up to.”

“No, you came out here, into my space—“

“Pretty sure this is public property,” but Regulus ignores him.

“—and decided that you have the right to pry—“

“I didn’t realize astronomy was such a touchy subject for you.”

Regulus lets out a frustrated growl and James half expects him to reach for his wand again. “You don’t just get to go around doing whatever you like—taking whatever you like. You don’t have a right to everything just because you’re James bloody Potter.”

James blinks, watching as Regulus’s chest heaves under his shirt. He’s sitting up straight again, taking Regulus in properly. He looks...tired.

“Okay,” James says, eventually.

Regulus stares at him. “I—okay?”

James nods. “You’re right, I don’t have a right to everything.”

The younger boy continues to eye him wearily, like he’s waiting for the punchline. When none comes he seems to deflate, and after another prolonged stretch of silence that has James itching to move, Regulus walks over and sits down next to him on the ledge.

“Sorry,” he says finally, the word stiff. Uncomfortable. He stares ahead the whole time, not looking at James once. “It’s been a...bad day,” the last words are quiet.

James’s eyes run him over—his shoulders pulled too far back, hands clutching at his knees.

“Reg has it—“

“Oh don’t you dare,” he cuts him off. “Regulus was bad enough, lets not be so gauche as to resort to nicknames.”

James has to bite the inside of his cheek to keep from laughing, Regulus’s posh accent coming out in full force. There is something mildly charming about the way that he embraces it. James, on the other hand, has spent years meticulously trying to train the good breeding out of his voice.

“Has it occurred to you,” James pushes on, despite the interruption, “that I’m not actually trying to take anything from you?”

“No.”

The answer comes so quickly and so decisively that James finds he’s actually startled by it.

“Why?”

There's a moment of silence before Regulus finally turns to face him. “Isn’t that what people do? Isn’t that what *we* do?”

“We?” James repeats, feeling a little off kilter.

Regulus must see it because he rolls his eyes. “Not you and I specifically. But our—our sides.”

“I’m not on anyone’s side,” it’s such an automatic response, James doesn’t even think about it, but once he hears the words outloud he realizes that they aren’t true. That they can’t be, not anymore.

Regulus gives him a piteous once over. “You’re such a child.”

“Oi!” James says indignantly. “I’m older than you.”

“Yes, pathetic isn’t it?” but there’s the sliver of a smile somewhere in his mouth that takes the edge off. James likes it. Likes when he gets that armour to crack. It reminds him a bit of Remus if he’s honest—the way he was when they were younger. The way he still is sometimes.

“Hey Reg?” he says after a brief pause.

Regulus lets out a huff, dropping his face into his hands. “I swear to all that is holy Potter, if you start calling me that in public I will end you.”

This time James can’t stop the laughter from spilling out of his mouth. “Noted.”

Regulus waits a beat before dropping his hands and sending him a pointed look. “*Well?* Your inflection suggested there was a question to follow?”

James nods, still smiling. “What are you doing up here, at two in the morning with a telescope?”

“Is there something else I should be up here with?”

“A girl’d make more sense.”

Something flashes across Regulus’s face that James can’t quite catch, and all of a sudden he’s looking away again. “Did you not listen to anything I said five minutes ago?” he asks, voice tight.

“I did,” James says slowly. “You don’t owe me an answer, but I want you to know that I’m asking because I’m interested, not because I want something to hold over your head.”

That seems to surprise Regulus, though he does his best not to show it. James waits, which really, he thinks is impressive. He’s usually quite impatient. But there’s something about Regulus...something...delicate. And James finds himself wanting desperately not to break whatever it is that’s keeping him here. Still. Next to him.

Regulus lets out a breath like he’s been holding it in for days.

“We’re all there,” he says finally, still not looking at James. He wants so badly to ask him to explain but he doesn’t. He keeps waiting. After several painful minutes Regulus goes on: “Me, Sirius, my father—we’re all there, together, holding up the night sky,” he shakes his head, picking apart his fingers in his lap. “I started coming up here in second year, when Sirius stopped talking to me. Up there we’re still...*whole*. I don’t know. It makes me think that maybe in a different time, a different world, there’s an us that’s still—there’s a place that’s not like this.”

Oh.

How does he respond to that? How does he even begin to hold all those feelings? He remembers third year, remembers Sirius showing up to school covered in bruises he didn’t yet know how to erase. James hadn’t thought about Regulus, about whether or not he deserved to be lumped in with the rest of them, about whether or not he had his own bruises. He’d just wanted to take Sirius away. To shield him. Keep him to himself.

When James takes too long to say something Regulus laughs, burying the heels of his hands into his eyes. “That sounds ridiculous now that I say it out loud.”

“Nah—no, it doesn’t,” James says quickly, glad his voice doesn’t sound as shaky as he feels. “It—” he swallows, picking through all the words in his head, trying to find the right ones. “I think Sirius does it too.”

That causes Regulus to look back at him, grey eyes bright in the moonlight.

“I catch him sometimes,” James explains, “looking out the dorm room window at night, I didn’t really think about it before but...” James doesn’t know what to make of the expression on Regulus’s face. “Course,” he goes on, smiling a bit, “you didn’t hear that from me.”

Regulus lets out a breath that might be a laugh. “No, of course not.”

They sit in silence, but it's not uncomfortable. Not the kind that makes your skin itch. And James almost misses it, when Regulus starts to pull away.

“I should go,” he says, getting to his feet. “Quidditch practice tomorrow.”

James feels himself grin. “Big match against Hufflepuff coming up.”

Regulus rolls his eyes, waving his wand and shrinking the telescope back down so that he can slip it into his pocket. “Hardly.”

“You ready?” James asks, resisting the sudden urge to pull Regulus back down beside him.

Regulus sends him a sly look. “Always.” He’s at the door, one hand on the handle, but he pauses, standing there for long enough that James starts to wonder if he’s having some kind of stroke.

“I’m not my brother,” Regulus says eventually, eyes darting up to meet James’s.

Surprised by the sudden change in topic, it takes James a minute to respond. “I know.”

“Just, if that’s why—if that’s what—“ he stops, face scrunching in frustration as he attempts to get his thoughts in order. “If that’s why you’re doing this, if you think you can...*save me*, the way you did him. You should know that you can’t.”

James feels his thoughts go in a million different directions at those words, unsure of what to address first.

“Do you need to be saved Reg?” he manages finally.

He isn’t sure what he’s expecting, but it’s certainly not the sad smile that peeks out of the corner of Regulus’s mouth. “Goodnight, Potter.”

James watches the door close behind him.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks again for all of your lovely comments on the last chapter truly appreciate it!

Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

TW: Panic attack

This starts soft and fluffy and then gets less so...but, it's gonna be okay...well...I mean...as okay as James and Regulus can be...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

He's not sure how it starts exactly. It's an accident, he's almost certain, a coincidence, that he finds himself heading up to the astronomy tower almost every night after his friends have gone to sleep. Another coincidence, that Regulus is always there. It's strange how quickly he starts to know Regulus. The different ways he smiles without using his mouth. Or how he tugs at his fingers when he gets nervous. James doesn't know what it means that he notices these things. He doesn't try to figure it out. Maybe he doesn't want to.

"You're telling me you've been at this school for four years," James is lying on his back, arms thrown behind his head, "and you've never stepped foot in the Forbidden Forest?"

"Excuse me for taking the 'Forbidden' part of the name seriously," Regulus says, sitting with one knee pulled up, chin resting on top.

James snorts. "Right little rule follower, aren't you?"

"I just happen to be in possession of something called *common sense*, you might want to try it."

"Pfft," James says dismissively, "sounds dead boring."

"Yes, well, you would think so."

James pushes himself up onto his elbows so that he can look at Regulus properly. He seems different like this, curled up, shirt untucked. *Soft*, James's brain supplies, *he looks soft*.

"I'll take you," he's says finally.

Regulus arches his brow. "You'll take me where?"

"The forest, obviously."

Regulus makes a disapproving noise. "I'm not going in there."

"Aw, come on," James knocks his foot against Regulus's. "You'll love it, I promise."

"Somehow, I doubt that."

"Listen, if you're scared—"

"I'm not scared," Regulus interrupts sharply, and James does his best not to laugh. "I'm not scared," he repeats. "I'm smart. There's a difference."

"If you say so," James knocks his foot again, this time staying there, pressed to Regulus's ankle. "But my point was, that if you did happen to be scared," James holds up his hands the minute he sees Regulus open his mouth, "which you aren't, obviously. But if you were, you should know that you'd have a distinct advantage going in there with me."

Regulus snorts. "And why's that?"

"Because," James grins. "Gryffindors are contractually obligated to sacrifice themselves. So you'll have a decent head start while whatever terrible monster we run into feasts on my flesh."

There's a beat of silence before Regulus drops his face into his knees, shoulders shaking with laughter.

Making regulus laugh is new. Good new. Really good new. It feels like scoring a goal in a quidditch match. Like scoring the winning goal.

"I can't believe you stole a snitch," Regulus says, batting the ball in question away from his face.

James smiles, catching it easily in his hand as it starts zooming over the edge of the tower. "Really? You can't believe it?" Regulus rolls his eyes, but James can tell he's trying not to smile. "Besides," he goes on, feeling smug. "I'm not stealing, just...borrowing."

"Of course, you are."

James tosses the snitch up and down a few times before he notices Regulus watching him. The younger boy quickly turning back to his telescope.

"The Catapults are your favourite quidditch team?" Regulus repeats in shock. They're sitting on the ground, leaning against the castle, James's most recent haul from Honeydukes piled between them.

"I don't know why you're so surprised," James says, biting off the end of his jelly wand.

“The *Catapults*?” is all Regulus has to say in return.

James rolls his eyes. “They're badass. I mean, the award for riskiest play is named after one of their players, doesn't get much cooler than that.”

“Because he was eaten by a chimera,” Regulus says flatly. “Not because he did anything particularly impressive on the pitch.”

“Correction,” James waves around his half-eaten gummy to emphasize his point. “He was eaten by a chimera AND he was impressive on the pitch. Can't ask for a better legacy than that.”

Regulus stares blankly at him. “I can't tell if you're joking right now or if you're genuinely this ridiculous.”

James grins. “Part of my charm, that.”

“He's trying to collect them all?” Regulus asks incredulously, passing his chocolate frog card to James.

“Yeah.”

“That's absurd.”

James laughs, “Yup,” he slips the card into the pocket of his hoodie, “but you gotta respect his commitment.”

Regulus arches his brow in a manner that suggests he does not think that you actually *do* have to respect it, but he doesn't say anything. Instead he turns his head and stares out over the grounds, closing his eyes for a moment and breathing in.

“Bad day?” James asks eventually, when the silence drags on too long.

Regulus sighs. “Maybe, I don't know.”

James watches him, waiting for him to keep going. He's learned in these moments that Regulus needs to feel like he's in control.

“I got a letter from home.”

James feels himself stiffen. They don't talk about his family. James isn't sure that he wants to — that he can.

“It—my dad,” his voice is clipped, words barely making it out. He struggles to keep going. “He's...sick.”

“What?”

Regulus leans back against the pillar behind him, head tilted up towards the sky. “I thought Sirius might have told you...” he lets that hang there between them while James tries to collect himself.

“No,” he can hear the hurt in his voice and he hates it. “No, he didn’t say. Has it been...has your dad been sick awhile?”

Regulus nods, not dropping his eyes from the sky.

“And the healers can’t do anything?”

A dry laugh, James is learning to hate those, they’re nothing like his real laugh which is full and strong.

“No, blood curse or something. Hereditary. Purebloods, you know, all that inbreeding.”

James does know, he has the vague memory of his mum telling him about an aunt who died from something similar.

“Does that mean...” a sentence he can’t bring himself to finish.

Finally, Regulus’s eyes come back to him. “That Sirius has it?” he shrugs. “We don’t know—won’t, not until it happens.”

James feels a little light headed for a moment, fingers digging into the stone building underneath him. The pain helps, it keeps him grounded. *We figured out how to turn ourselves into animagi for Remus*, he thinks to himself, trying to get his stomach muscles to unclench. *We’ll figure this out too if we have to.*

It takes a moment before he realizes that Regulus is watching him, a curious expression on his face. “You really care about him, don’t you?”

“Yes,” James answers without question. And then: “Not just him, though.”

Regulus’s expression flickers and then quickly goes out. He looks down at his lap, picking some lint off his pants in a poor attempt to appear indifferent. “Anyway,” he presses on, voice carefully held. Guarded. “It’s hard, hearing from him, when I can’t...do anything. To help.”

James isn’t sure what to say. He realizes, suddenly, that he doesn’t know much about Mr. Black. Most of Sirius’s stories centre around Walburga—her rules and her bigotry and her sharp magic. Magic that liked to slice into him any chance it got, sometimes lashing out unconsciously, his mother’s anger bleeding out of her and leaving him broken. If Sirius spoke of his father, it was as the shadowy figure in the background, who said and did nothing.

“He works at the Ministry right?” James says finally, pulling out the one piece of information he thinks he can remember.

“He did. But it—he’s gotten worse recently. He can’t really use his magic anymore. Too bad, he used to be brilliant.”

James recognizes that tone, knows that that's how he sounds when he talks about his own dad. He tries not to feel angry at Regulus, really he does, but he can't get the images of Sirius alone on his doorstep out of his head. Or showing up to the Hogwarts Express every year held together by tape and glue.

"They're nice to you?" James finds himself asking.

Regulus doesn't seem surprised by the question. "I love them."

James bites back the automatic responses of *how?* and *why?* Because he knows they won't get him anywhere. Knows they'll just shut Regulus down.

"That's not the same thing," he says finally.

Regulus smiles dryly. "No," he concedes, "but it's the thing that matters."

James has started sleeping better, which is ridiculous considering how much less time he's spending in bed. But it helps, for some reason, talking to Regulus. There's something... steadying, about the other boy. Now when he closes his eyes, the darkness is full of stars.

"Oi, you lot! Hurry up, we're going be late," James is walking backwards down the hill towards the pitch, desperately trying to corral the majority of the fifth year Gryffindors. Mary and Sirius are messing about in some strange mating ritual that's halfway between wrestling and dancing, and not moving them any closer to the Quidditch pitch. Marlene and Dorcas are making bets on the match with a group of Hufflepuffs and Peter is having an adamant argument with Giffard Abbott about whose chocolate is better: Honeydukes or Cadbury, which for some reason has effected their ability to walk at a reasonable pace.

James sighs, running a hand over his face before looking at the lone figure beside him. "You're my favourite Moony, have I ever told you that?"

Remus snorts, watching the chaos unfolding behind them with mild amusement. "Uh huh."

"Wait," James eyes the bag hanging off of Remus's shoulder. "Did you—did you bring textbooks with you?!"

Remus clutches at the bag like he's worried James is about to rip it away from him, sending his friend a sheepish look. "Uh...might have, yeah."

James throws his hands up over his head. "Forget it, I take it back, I hate all of you equally."

"Oh please!" comes Sirius's voice as he starts making his way towards them, Mary now on his back. "You love us."

"I'd love you more if you could get your asses moving," James says as they start walking again, throngs of other students in yellow and green moving with them.

Sirius rolls his eyes. “I don’t know why you’re so interested in this game, we all know Hufflepuff’s got it in the bag.”

“Is that a bet I hear Black?” Marlene calls from behind them.

Sirius laughs. “Not a chance McKinnon, I’ve learned my lesson. You cleaned me out last time.”

“Hufflepuff does not have it in the bag,” James says resolutely.

“Do you wanna—“

“No Marlene,” James cuts her off. He thinks he hears her mumble ‘cowards’ but he can’t be sure.

“Wow, I never would have expected the marauders to be so cautious with their money,” Mary says, dropping her face down and planting a kiss on Sirius’s cheek.

James shoots a quick glance at Moony, but he’s staring straight ahead, hands wrapped tightly around the strap of his bag. They haven’t talked about...well...anything, since the library. James has gotten the distinct impression that Remus has been going out of his way to avoid being alone with him, which he personally thinks is a bit dramatic. If Remus doesn’t want to talk about it that’s fine with James, but that doesn’t mean he’s gonna let his friend suffer.

“Oi, you two, lets keep it decent yeah? There are children present.”

“And by children do you mean yourself?” Mary asks, eyebrow raised.

“Mary, don’t be ridiculous,” James holds a hand to his chest as though deeply offended. “I meant Peter.”

She laughs, sliding off of Sirius’s back.

“I heard that!” Peter calls out.

“Inside voice sweetie!” James shouts over his shoulder, causing general laughter to bubble up from the surrounding group.

“We are literally outside!”

“Don’t make me get your father young man!”

Mary raises her brow as Peter mumbles a myriad of curses behind them. “You’re not the father?”

“Pfft,” James says. “Obviously not, Sirius is the father, clearly. Never gives you his approval, emotionally distant, can’t be relied on—”

“Twat,” Sirius laughs, punching him in the arm before turning to Mary. “He’s right though, I am clearly the father.”

Remus makes an exasperated noise. “The amount of bollocks you two talk is truly astounding.”

James grins, opening his mouth to speak before Mary beats him to it.

“I’d have thought Remus would be the mother.”

Remus groans, “Please don’t encourage them, they’re insufferable enough as it is.”

“See,” she says, gesturing to the unimpressed blond.

Both James and Sirius look back at her unconvinced.

“What exactly about dry acerbic wit screams “mother” to you?” Sirius asks.

“Yeah, Moony’s really more of an angsty teenager,” James agrees.

“For Christ’s sake,” Remus mutters beside him, prompting James to swing his arm around his friend, pulling him into a hug.

“But we love him anyway.”

“Our wittle moody Moony,” Sirius uses a baby voice that has James cackling.

Remus eventually manages to shove James off, attempting to glare, though his eyes are a bit too bright to make it believable. The truth is, Remus can take a joke better than most people.

“Alright,” Mary says finally, squinting at Remus like he’s a painting she’s trying to work out. “I guess I can see your point.”

“Trust me,” Sirius pulls Mary in and kisses the top of her head. “We’ve thought about this.”

James doesn’t miss the way Remus looks away.

The crowd gets thicker as they enter the stadium, the noise suddenly so big you can feel it in your chest. A group of Hufflepuffs in the middle of the stands have started a chant:

*Hufflepuffs are just and loyal
unafraid of any toil
But don’t cross yellow and black
We will always get you back*

Which quickly devolves into the simpler refrain of:

*Yellow and black
On the attack!
Yellow and black
On the attack!*

James smiles. He loves this. He thought his heart was going to explode the first time he stepped onto the Hogwarts quidditch pitch. The Potters have a sprawling backyard and some play hoops set up, but it's nothing like this. He never gets less excited no matter how many games he watches. Already he can feel his skin buzzing with anticipation.

The group of them push their way through the throngs of other students, looking for a group of seats together; which wouldn't have been a problem, James thinks bitterly, if his friends could walk in a straight-bloody-line. In the end, Peter and Abbott find seats together so they can continue the great chocolate debate of '75 and Dorcas and Marlene break off to sit with Lily and Alice. James very determinedly does not look at Evans.

"These seats aren't bad," Sirius says, as they finally settle, far closer to the ground than James would like. He only grumbles in response.

"Oh, don't sulk."

"I mean, he's not wrong," Mary leans over the railing, peering at the grass below. "These seats are rubbish."

"Thank you Macdonald," James says, feeling deeply validated.

Remus is the only one sitting, textbook already open on his lap. It physically pains James to see it.

"I'm gonna wear you down one of these days, you know," he says, nudging at him playfully.

Remus smiles without looking up. "Sure you will, James."

James snorts, turning back to the pitch. It's late afternoon, slightly overcast in that way the weather always seems to be in the fall. Somehow it makes all the colours more saturated—the greens and yellows. James starts drumming his fingers against the railing, bouncing on the balls of his feet, impatient for the game to start.

"I'm telling you," Sirius says, leaning in next to him. "Hufflepuff has this one in the bag. Morrow is the best seeker at this school."

"Better not let Marlene hear you say that," Mary says in a sing-song voice.

"It's not all about the snitch," James argues, because it isn't. Everyone always thinks about that 150 points, but quidditch is so much more than that. The best teams have deep talent - all the positions, all the moving parts, they matter. He wishes more people understood that. Which is what he should say. What he normally *would* say. And then Sirius would roll his eyes and tease him about being a dork and they would all move on. Unfortunately, for reasons James can't comprehend, what comes out of his mouth is: "Besides, you're underestimating Regulus."

He feels, more than he sees, Sirius stiffen. That comment even catching Remus's attention, causing him to look up from his reading.

"Am I?" there is something far too careful about Sirius's voice—too controlled.

James grimaces. *Fuck*. “Sorry mate, I didn’t think—just quidditch brain, you know? I wasn’t —“

But Sirius cuts him off with the wave of his hand. “It’s fine. You’re right, he’s not bad, Reg,” but there’s still an edge of bitterness to his tone that doesn’t feel right. “Helps that he has the newest broom model as well, hard for Morrow to compete with that on his three-year-old Cleansweep.”

James has to bite down on his tongue to keep from telling Sirius that he doesn’t think that that’s, strictly speaking, entirely fair. Even if part of him knows that Sirius has a point. “Yeah,” is all he ends up saying.

James feels himself let out a sigh of relief when Madam Hooch steps onto the pitch, distracting them from the newly uncomfortable silence that’s settled around them. The announcer calls out the names of the Hufflepuff players as they file out, waving to the crowd and inspiring a new round of “Yellow and black, on the attack!”

James isn’t really thinking about how watching Regulus play might be different now that he knows him. Their conversations in the astronomy tower are so disconnected from everything else that James hasn’t really tried to...make sense of them. To make them fit. Sure, he sees Regulus every once in a while in the great hall or the corridors between classes, but they’re only glimpses. Nothing has changed really.

So he isn’t expecting to feel anything when Regulus walks out onto the pitch in his tight white quidditch pants and green kit. Isn’t expecting his stomach to drop into the soles of his shoes beating at about a mile a minute. An exhale shooting out of him like he’s just been punched in the gut. Sirius sends him a questioning look.

James doesn’t know what’s happening. He doesn’t know what the hell this feeling is. Nerves? Is he nervous? Nervous that Sirius might notice? Might figure it out? Might be mad? Well, okay, that last one isn’t a might, he knows that Sirius will be mad. He keeps meaning to tell him—he’s been meaning to tell him since the first time with Snape. He doesn’t know why he hasn’t. Mostly, he imagines, it’s because he doesn’t know what to say.

But oh—oh Regulus is mounting his broom and James’s heart gives another lurch.

“You alright there?” Sirius asks.

“Yup,” James’s voice is clipped, hands gripping the railing so tightly his knuckles have gone white.

“You look like you’re gonna be sick?” Sirius sounds genuinely concerned.

James is too, if he’s being honest. Maybe it’s something he ate? Maybe he’s sick?

“Well, if you’re gonna be sick make sure to do it on your other side,” Mary says, without taking her eyes off the pitch. The snitch has been released, the players are in the air, and James is making a concerted effort not to look at anyone.

“Oi! Not on my book you better not,” Remus says, but his eyes linger on James too. “Prongs? You really do look a bit—“

“I’m *fine*,” he bites out, putting on a smile that he knows isn’t exactly reassuring. “Just... headache. It’s okay.”

“Do you wanna go back?” Remus asks, a little too excited if James is being honest.

“I’m not missing the match!”

Sirius lets out a laugh from his other side, shaking his head as he mutters to himself: “*Obsessed.*”

"You're sure?" Remus pushes. "Because I really wouldn't mind-"

"I'm sure, Remus. Very, very sure." Remus lets out a disappointed sigh, returning, reluctantly, to his reading, and allowing James to continue to panic in peace.

It's okay. This is okay. It’s quidditch. James loves quidditch. He watches the keepers closest, since they’re who he needs to know best. Distracting himself from whatever is going on with him by breaking down their saves and misses, picking apart the gaps in their training. *Focus on the game*, he tells himself, *just focus on the game*. Slowly, his breathing evens out, his grip on the railing relaxing.

“Fucking foul!” Mary shouts, as a Slytherin Beater nearly knocks the Hufflepuff player he’s chasing off her broom with his club.

“She’ll get back up,” James says confidently, watching as the girl—who is currently hanging onto her broom with one hand—starts to swing, gaining momentum and then beautifully throwing her leg back over the handle.

“It’s still a fucking foul,” Mary mutters.

“You reckon Slughorn’s paying Hooch off?” Sirius asks, Hufflepuff scoring another goal despite the dirty play.

“What’s that—thirty to ten?” James asks, not taking his eyes off the game. “And no, bastard’s too cheap for bribery.”

Sirius snorts. “Touché.”

“Maybe she does it for the slug club invite,” Mary smirks.

Sirius and James make nearly identical noises of disgust.

“Not fans?” she asks innocently.

“I can’t think of anything worse than a dinner party with that toad and a bunch of swots,” Sirius says, shivering at the very thought.

“Well fuck you very much,” comes Remus’s dry tone.

“Oh come on Moony, you know I didn’t mean you,” Sirius leans around James so he can shoot Remus a smile, “Besides, you only went the once. Barely counts.”

“Wasn’t worth the heckling I got,” Remus says flatly.

Mary laughs, “Jeez, you lot really are arseholes aren’t you?”

“Oi!” James and Sirius say at the same time that Remus says: “Yes.”

“Though,” Remus goes on, “to be fair, it was a bloody insufferable dinner party.”

“Aha!” Sirius exclaims happily. “See, exactly, that’s what I’m saying.”

“And there’s Slytherin with their second goal of the game!” comes the announcers magnified voice.

“Shit,” James whips his head back to the game. “I missed it. You two,” he gestures between Remus and Sirius, “no more bickering until the game is over.”

“We’re not—“

“Shhh,” James waves his hand in Sirius’s face, not daring to take his eyes off the game again. The Hufflepuff keeper is new and James really wants to figure out his strategy before they play against each other.

And that’s when something small and green catches his attention. He’d been doing a good job of not looking at the seekers—not particularly hard considering they’re usually on the fringes of the game anyway. But this—Regulus has done a straight dive for the ground, moving almost impossibly fast. For the third time this game James feels something weird pull at his chest. *Be careful*, he thinks before he can help it. *Be careful, be careful, be careful.*

“Has he seen the snitch?” Mary demands, her upper body halfway over the railing. “I don’t see anything. James?”

He tears his eyes away from the speeding figure to look around him. “No,” he says slowly, “No I don’t see it either.”

“Morrow’s going now,” Sirius says, though James thinks he hears a new anxiety in his friend’s voice as they watch his younger brother hurtle towards the earth.

Be careful.

Be careful.

Be careful.

“Holy shit!” Mary says, all of a sudden.

James is about to ask her what she's on about when Regulus abruptly pulls up—it's truly an incredible show of broom work. Morrow doesn't stand a chance, realizing too late what's happening and trying desperately to pull himself out of the dive. He doesn't manage it, not completely anyway, slowing down enough that he doesn't crash, but not enough that he can avoid the ground completely, rolling off of his broom as he hits the grass.

"Merlin," booms the commentator's voice through the stadium. "We just witnessed one of the best Wronski Feints I've ever seen!"

James grins, heart beating out of control as the adrenaline buzzes under his skin. He watches Regulus flying in smooth circles above the game, the Slytherin's going absolutely mental.

"Magic," James breathes, happy that Sirius is distracted by an excited Mary.

"And there's Hufflepuff with another goal, bringing the score to forty - twenty," the announcer calls out, another goal James missed. Distracted again.

Now that he's found Regulus he can't seem to look anywhere else, watching helplessly as Regulus coolly maneuvers through the game, tracking Morrow, waiting. Seekers require absolute control, self-restraint—the ability to sit back and observe. Regulus was practically born for this.

Hufflepuff gets another two goals.

Sirius elbows him. "Told you," he says smugly.

"No, you said Morrow would get the snitch. Which he hasn't."

Sirius rolls his eyes. "I said Hufflepuff would win."

"Because Morrow was going to catch the snitch."

"Jeez, you're as anal as Marlene with her bets."

James snorts. "I'll take that as a compliment."

The Hufflepuffs get another goal—the crowd is going wild, students holding up their wands and shooting off alternating yellow and black sparks.

"Damn," Mary says, sounding impressed, "they're really kicking ass this game."

James hums noncommittally, eyes bouncing around the field from player to player.

"What are they doing?"

All three of them turn to look at Remus, who shades his eyes with his hand as he stares up at the sky. After a moment he seems to notice the rest of them staring at him. "Yes?"

"Moony," Sirius says slowly, sounding slightly awestruck, "are you...watching the match?"

Remus rolls his eyes. “I looked up for a second and—but then I saw...well...*that*,” he jabs his finger at the sky and they follow it to Regulus, currently floating next to the Hufflepuff seeker...talking?

“Are they having a date in the middle of a quidditch match?” Mary demands, half-amused and half-indignant.

“I—“ and then James stops. Because—because he sees it. The tiny fleck of gold just by Morrow’s ear.

Regulus is apparently laying on the charm because Morrow is suddenly laughing, his entire attention on Regulus and completely oblivious to the snitch currently behind his head. James blinks, rubs his eyes, blinks again. But no. No it’s really happening. Regulus Black is going to flirt his way into winning this quidditch match.

“The Hufflepuff’s are in possession again,” the announcer calls out, as oblivious as everyone else. “Johnson speeding down the pitch—ooh, nice bludger dodge mate. The badgers really are on fire today. Avery trying to make a save and—Oh my god, oh my god he’s got it, Black has caught the snitch! Where the hell did that come from?!”

A horn blares out signalling the end of the match, Morrow looking dazed and confused as Regulus glides down on to the pitch still holding the snitch in his hand, his team tackling him almost as soon as his feet touch the ground. All the Slytherins in the stands are on their feet, stamping and shouting and throwing green scarves around.

“How did that just happen?” Sirius asks, dumbfounded.

“God, I feel bad for Morrow,” Mary adds, “no one’s going to let him forget this.”

James means to respond but he’s working too hard on controlling his face, on not smiling as broadly, and madly, as he currently wants to, watching as Regulus is hoisted up onto his teammates’ shoulders. Even now, Regulus doesn’t smile with his whole mouth, his happiness hiding in the corners, the golden snitch sparkling in his hand as he holds it up. It makes James breathless.

James doesn’t expect him to come—not after the first win of the season. But he goes up to the astronomy tower anyway, brings a book and the map. His whole body feels like it’s still buzzing from the match, and he can’t help running over the plays in his mind again and again. He gives up on homework eventually and starts scribbling down strategies to run by Frank at practice tomorrow. There’s a cool breeze drifting in off the grounds. It’s halfway through October now and the weather is always crisp and sharp. Goosebumps pepper James’s skin, but he doesn’t mind it.

His head snaps up when he hears the door open, blinking as Regulus stumbles in, still in his quidditch kit.

Oh.

James blinks.

Regulus's hair is mussed in a way it never is, his pale cheeks pink and eyes wide and glassy.

"Well look who it is," James can't help but smile, placing his parchment and quill down beside him and turning to face Regulus head on.

"Here I am," his words come out overly articulated—like he's thinking hard about each one.

"Figured you'd be busy celebrating that win," James goes on when Regulus continues to stand there.

"But you came anyway?"

James shrugs, not sure he knows what to say to that. Not sure he could explain it to himself even.

"You gonna sit down or...?"

"Right," Regulus nods to himself. "Right. Yeah."

He moves the same way he spoke—with too much thought, one foot placed cautiously in front of the other every step of the way until he's collapsing next to James on the ledge. He smells like quidditch and firewhisky.

"Good party?" James asks, watching Regulus pull his legs up, crossing them on the ledge. It makes him look painfully sweet, especially when he runs a hand through his messy dark curls.

"Party? —Oh, yeah. Yeah, you know."

James arches his brow, "You really are sloshed aren't you?"

Regulus tries and fails not to smile. "I think I may have had an entire bottle of firewhisky," he admits, a little shyly. "Also, someone made Jelly shots."

And that's just too much. James throws his head back and laughs. "Oh my god, I cannot imagine you doing Jelly shots."

"I'm not sure if I should be insulted by that or not?" Regulus says, scrunching his face up. He's so much more expressive when he's drunk. James likes it.

"They're just, not very dignified are they? Tell me, did you raise your pinky finger when you did them?"

"Oh, fuck off."

"Were they served on a silver platter?"

At that Regulus's eyes go wide before quickly looking away.

“No,” James practically gasps. “No they weren’t! Merlin, you absolute wankers.”

“Hey! I had nothing to do with the placement of the refreshments,” Regulus says indignantly.

“Oh no, you don’t get to call Jelly shots *refreshments*.”

“I don’t see why not, that’s what they are after all,” Regulus retorts, putting a level of haughtiness behind his words that has James barely able to contain himself.

“There is nothing refreshing about Jelly shots.”

“Maybe you’ve just never had very good ones.”

James throws his hands up in the air. “I can’t believe you,” he says through a smile. “How’re you managing to be a snob about this? You pretentious little pri—“

“Enough, enough,” Regulus giggles—*actually* giggles—as he ungracefully reaches forward to cover James’s mouth. “So much talking.”

The move causes Regulus to fall forward, the hand not currently covering James’s mouth being used to hold him up in a crawl position. James feels his breath hitch, Regulus’s eyes big, and bright, and so close.

They freeze for a moment—not speaking, not moving—Regulus is drunk, but James has no idea what his excuse is. Eventually, Regulus drops his hand away from James’s face, but he doesn’t move back.

“You were brilliant today,” James breathes, he doesn’t know why, he just suddenly feels the need to tell him. Needs him to know.

“Yeah?” Regulus asks softly.

“That faint? It was beautiful Reg, I mean it. I—*God*, watching you I just—how did I never notice before? How did I never notice what a fucking star you are?”

Regulus snorts. “Literally.”

“Yeah,” James says, without the sarcasm. “Yeah, but you are though.”

Something shifts in Regulus’s expression that James doesn’t understand. They’re still so close, he can practically feel his breath.

“Guess you weren’t looking,” Regulus says eventually.

It takes a moment for James to realize what he’s saying. “Maybe,” he answers finally, “but I’m looking now.”

In retrospect, he should have seen it coming. He didn’t. But he should have.

The first thought he has, when Regulus pushes forward, pressing their mouths together, half-crawling into James's lap, is that he's so warm. His mouth. His hands. For a boy who walks around like he's made of stone, Regulus touches like the sun.

After that his brain sort of—short circuits.

He can't think.

He can't move.

He knows he should have seen this coming. But he didn't. He didn't. And for some reason that keeps him frozen. Everything overpowered by it.

I didn't know.

I didn't know this was what we were doing.

I didn't know this was who I was.

How could I not know?

How could I not know?

And then the heat is gone. James is shaking and dazed and staring up at Regulus who has jumped so far back he's on his feet, face broken open in horror as he looks down at James.

"I'm sorry," it's a word wrapped in all sorts of pain. "Fuck, fuck, I'm sorry I didn't—I didn't mean it." He's backing up towards the door, the pink flush gone from his cheeks. "I swear I didn't—" he chokes, he chokes and his voice hitches and James wants to make it better. Wants to fix this. Wants Regulus to never look like that ever again.

But he can't.

He can't.

How could he not know?

He flinches when the door slams and now that he's on his own he realizes that he isn't breathing right—too fast and too short. He's seen Moony like this before, like his body's forgotten how to breathe. James squeezes his eyes shut. Trying to get himself under control.

Breathe, he commands himself.

Breathe you idiot.

In and out.

In and out.

Fuck, something aches in his chest and he doesn't know what it's from but it hurts.

Breathe.

In and out.

In and out.

It's okay. This is okay. This can be okay.

It's just a kiss.

Except it isn't.

It's Sirius's brother.

It's Regulus Black.

It's a boy.

Breathe.

In and out.

In and out.

A boy who touches like the sun.

In and out.

In and

In and

In and

In—

Chapter End Notes

Yikes, that was intense

Have faith in James though, he'll get there.

Thanks as always for all the comments you guys are so kind, I love reading them all!

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

He doesn't go back to the astronomy tower the next night. Or the night after that. Neither does Regulus, James checks. That's how he spends his free time now. Watching Regulus's name move around the map. It is absolutely and utterly pathetic. But that doesn't stop him.

"Hey, earth to Prongs?" Sirius snaps his fingers impatiently in James's direction.

James looks up from the fireplace to find his three friends staring at him.

A beat passes.

"Sorry—what?"

Sirius huffs. "Halloween party planning, care to contribute?"

"Not really," he sinks lower in his chair, tilting his head back to look up at the ceiling. "Can't we just do what we did last year?"

Sirius gasps, scandalized. "Can't we just—are you—Remus are you hearing this?"

James is only vaguely paying attention. He knows that someone says something else, and then he hears the muffled noises of shuffling feet and closing books. Sirius doesn't start shouting again though, so he considers it a win.

Remus's face appears above him.

"Hey Moons," he says wearily.

Remus worries his bottom lip between his teeth, eyes running James over like he's a potion that's not boiling right. "Let's go shall we?" he says eventually.

James arches his brow. "Sorry, I can't go anywhere right now. I'm in the middle of some very important work."

"Oh yeah?"

James nods, expression serious. "Mhm, someone's got to count all the cracks in the ceiling."

Remus smiles, reaching down and grabbing hold of James's wrist, "Come on you lump, let's go."

"If you're going to kidnap me at least have the decency to tell me where we're going," James notices that Sirius has retreated to the other side of the common room with Mary, Pete nowhere to be seen. Remus clearly dismissed them.

“I’m not sure kidnappers are known for being particularly decent.”

“Semantics,” James mutters, allowing himself to be dragged through the portrait hole and into the hall on the other side.

They walk in silence at first, James shoving his newly freed hands into his pockets and making a concerted effort not to look at anyone. The problem with being a generally sociable person is there’s no efficient way to communicate to people to stay the fuck away from you when you’re having a bad day.

“You didn’t bring the cloak,” James finds himself saying, eventually.

“I did not. Very astute of you to notice.”

James huffs. “You going to be okay when we get detention for walking around after curfew?”

Remus taps the Prefect badge on his chest, sending James a sly look.

“Ah,” James says wisely. “The perks of selling out.”

Remus only rolls his eyes, continuing to lead the way. The nice thing about Moony—well, one of several—is that he’s not a bad person to *not* talk to. He’s not uncomfortable with silence. He can let things be, in a way that James has never been very good at. It doesn’t bother Remus that you’re sad, not because he doesn’t care, but because he understands that sometimes things can’t be fixed. They just need to be felt.

“Snacks?” James asks, as they stroll up to the painting of the bowl of fruit, Remus tickling the pear with great dignity.

“Hot chocolate,” Moony corrects.

James follows him through the portrait hole, smiling. He should have guessed.

“Hello sirs!”

“How can we be of help sirs?”

“What be you needing young masters?”

At least a dozen house elves swarm them. James never gets used to it. The Potter’s only have one house elf—Mimi—and she isn’t anything like the Hogwarts elves. For starters, she’s always giving James shit: “*Oh the little master has lost both his arms I see, that is why his bed is still unmade,*” or “*Master James seems to have lost his sight at school, that is why he cannot see the mess on his bedroom floor.*”

“Two mugs of hot chocolate would be lovely if you wouldn’t mind,” Remus says, walking towards the nearest table. “Is it ok if we stay for a bit?”

“Not at all sirs!”

“Right away sirs!”

“Will you be wanting marshmallows sirs?”

Remus turns to James, brow raised.

“Uh—yeah, sure. Thanks,” he rubs the back of his neck uncomfortably as the little creatures scurry about.

“So we’re staying then?” James asks, sitting down beside Remus.

Remus nods. “Figured it might help.”

“Help?”

At that moment two giant mugs, overflowing with mountains of already melting marshmallows, appear in front of them. Remus makes a pleased humming noise as he wraps his fingers around the one closest to him. “God, I love that smell,” he says happily.

James takes hold of his own mug, pressing the warm porcelain between his hands and trying to ignore the dull ache that has been sitting in his chest for the past few days.

“You don’t have to tell me what’s wrong,” Remus says eventually, causing James to look up. His friend is lowering his mug back down onto the table, eyes soft, but he can see the concern in them. “But...something *is* wrong, isn’t it?”

James stares back helplessly. “I—“ but nothing else comes out, a hundred words lodged in his throat. He sighs, running a hand over his face before swallowing them all back down with great difficulty. “I’m just tired,” is the best he can come up with.

It’s not a lie. The nightmares have made a return. Except now sometimes Regulus is the one who’s screaming. And James never makes it on time.

Remus looks at him skeptically. “James, you love Halloween.”

“That’s because Halloween is amazing.”

Remus sends him a pointed look that James chooses to ignore, becoming suddenly much more interested in his hot chocolate.

“You were barely paying attention earlier,” Remus pushes on. “Usually I’d be trying to convince you and Sirius not to sneak a troll into the castle or charm the sofa cushions to growl at people.”

James snorts. “Those are both excellent ideas.”

“And you’d have come up with them if you hadn’t been so busy sulking.”

James groans, dropping his head into his hands. Part of him wants to tell Remus—is desperate to tell him. But another part of him is terrified. It was so easy, when he could keep

Regulus up in that tower, away from everything and everyone else. Away from the rest of his life, so he didn't have to think about what he was doing.

"Listen, like I said, you don't have to tell me okay?" Remus says, reaching across the table and tapping his shoulder lightly, letting James know that he's there. "But the thing is, well, you're usually kind of an open book, and since not one of us has any idea what's going on with you it's thrown us for a bit of a loop," he pauses, "especially Pads."

James scrubs at his face before sitting back and meeting Remus's gaze. "He told you to talk to me?"

Remus smirks. "Please, he wanted to talk to you himself. But since he has the emotional awareness of a toddler, I figured that would be completely useless."

James snorts. "Probably right."

Remus takes another sip of his hot chocolate, waiting. Waiting for James. He's never hidden anything from them before. He knows that *they* do—Sirius and Remus especially. He sees it sometimes, in the tight way they hold their mouths, or drop their eyes. He doesn't mind, he knows that it's harder for them. Knows that part of his job—his role—is to be open. To be bright. To prove everything they think about the world wrong. To prove that there is good and sometimes that's enough. Sometimes the worse thing doesn't happen.

He sighs. "I—" he starts, voice going out on him almost immediately. He clears his throat and tries again. "I think I hurt someone," he swallows with difficulty. "I think I hurt someone and I don't know... *fuck* Remus, I don't know how to fix it."

The obvious questions—the who and the how—don't come. And James is grateful.

"Well, assuming that you didn't kill them...?" he waits for James to nod in the affirmative. "Have you tried apologizing?"

James lets out a breath. "I don't know how."

"I'm sorry is usually a good start."

"Yeah," James picks at the table. "Yeah, it's just... I don't know, it—it's complicated."

When a few minutes pass without Remus saying anything James forces himself to look up. His friend is watching him thoughtfully, that little crease between his eyes he gets when he's thinking too hard. James braces himself for an onslaught of questions that he can't answer. Not right now. Maybe not ever. But he should have known better. This is Moony after all.

"Okay," the other boy says eventually. "So just talk to them."

James looks at him flatly and Remus laughs. "Look, despite what Sirius Black would have you believe, torturing yourself doesn't solve anything. It sure as hell doesn't do anything for the person you hurt."

His chest aches, thinking about Regulus's face, standing there after he'd kissed him, so fucking scared.

"Maybe I'm just a coward."

Remus makes a disbelieving noise. "James, you are, without a doubt, one of the bravest people I have ever met."

He rolls his eyes, but Remus isn't done. "I swear the first years think you actually are Godric Gryffindor."

"They do not," James can't quite keep a straight face.

"Please, their eyes get so wide when you walk by I worry they're going to fall out. But," he shrugs, a smile in the corner of his mouth, "if they're gonna idolize someone, there are worse people they could choose."

That gets a proper laugh out of James, and Remus sips smugly at his hot chocolate before reaching across the table to squeeze his shoulder.

"Talk to them, okay?"

James nods slowly, playing with his mug for a minute before speaking again. "Listen, speaking of apologies, I've been meaning to...*you know*," his hand goes to the back of his neck, nervously. "I didn't mean to make you feel uncomfortable the other day, in the library."

He sees Remus's posture tense as he carefully raises his mug to his lips, taking his time. "I know."

It's late, the candles burning low as one or two of the house elves move around them, preparing for tomorrow.

"I'm sorry," he says, when Remus continues to sit there silently.

His friend lets out a breath. "I got that I—you don't need to be sorry," he says awkwardly, like his words are climbing over hurtles just to make it out of his mouth. "You didn't do anything wrong, I just...didn't want anyone to know," those last words are almost a whisper.

James nods. "I know, and they won't." He doesn't try to convince him not to worry, not to take it so seriously. Not after the way that went last time.

"Thank you," Remus clears his throat and speaks more forcibly. "Thank you for being so...so okay. With it. With me."

And for the first time, James has the smallest inkling that they may not be talking about the same thing.

"Sure," he says anyway, "of course."

They finish their hot chocolates in silence.

He has every intention of following Moony's advice. Really, he does. Except it turns out Regulus is almost constantly with people. Between classes. Between meals. At meals. He seems to specifically spend his time with Crouch and Rosier who, personally, James thinks are a particularly gross pair of companions to attach yourself to. But that's none of his business.

He spends a lot of his time trying to figure out how to get Regulus on his own and comparably little time thinking about what he's actually going to say. What he wants. Those questions are hard and twist his stomach up and if he thinks about them too long he loses his nerve. So he doesn't. He ignores them. A time tested method that has served him well in the past.

In the meantime, he is back to being fully invested in party planning.

"We'll get the booze from Rosmerta this weekend when we go into Hogsmeade," he says, running down the todo list in front of him.

"You mean *Padfoot* will get the booze," Peter doesn't quite manage to hide his bitterness.

Sirius, who had been lying on his back, turns over at that, propping his head up on his hand and grinning. "Jealous Wormy?"

Peter blushes. "I told you, I don't fancy her."

James tries and fails to smother a snort, earning him a sharp glare from Peter. "What? I'm sorry," he holds his hands up in surrender, "but you do turn into a tomato every time her name is mentioned."

"Listen, Pete, I can get you in there, she's not a complicated woman."

"Sirius, really?" Remus asks flatly. "Don't be a creep."

James sees something flicker across Sirius's face—like hurt—before he's able to mask it with a grin. "Only trying to help."

"Right, okay," James presses forward. "So booze is accounted for, Hagrid is supplying us with a shit-ton of pumpkins, and I'm pretty sure I've figured out how to charm the ceiling to flash with lightning and not drench us all in a torrential downpour."

"Is that why the sofas were so soggy the other day?" Peter asks.

"No comment. Moony, you've got music covered?"

"Of course."

"Hey, uh," Sirius sits up, running a hand nervously through his hair. Remus turns to him. "I have these—my uncle, he sent me these records, I don't know if you'd wanna take a look at

them or..." he trails off, shrugging in a way that is oddly self-conscious. "I don't know if they're really any good. I just thought, if you were looking for something new..."

Remus blinks, holding Sirius's gaze. "Yeah, I'd like that. Maybe you can show me latter?"

Sirius nods, a little overeager. "Yeah cool, 'course."

James's eyes bounce between his two friends before going back to the list in front of him. "Pete, you're on snack duty."

"I'm gonna clean Honeydukes the-fuck-out."

"That a boy," James leans forward to punch him playfully in the arm. "That just leaves—"

"Oi, James?"

Marlene appears, leaning over the back of the sofa. "Do you have the plays we worked on yesterday? I was hoping to run over them," her eyes spot the parchment in James's hands and the three other boys around him. "Oh, sorry. Am I interrupting a plotting session?"

"We don't plot," Remus says indignantly.

"Well, I mean," Peter's head wobbles from side-to-side, "we *do* plot a little."

James rolls his eyes, tossing the parchment in his hands to the side. "Yeah Mar, just give me a sec, it's upstairs."

"Trying to get on Frank's good side?" he hears Sirius ask her as he heads for the stairs.

"More like I'm trying to make sure I don't get shown up by your little brother."

It's a blessing really, that he's already around the corner at that point, because he isn't sure he manages to keep the grimace off his face.

So really, it's Marlene's fault that the first thing he does when he gets up to his room is grab the map, tapping it open on his bed and scanning for the familiar name. He's expecting Regulus to be in his room by now, it's—half past ten? Eleven? Maybe in the common room, with Crouch and Rosier.

Except he isn't. Not in either of those places.

James feels his breath hitch slightly, eyes going to the astronomy tower, but he isn't there either. Frank and Alice are though. James snorts. *Good for them*. He keeps looking, not sure where else Regulus could be. He runs over every inch of the castle before he sees him.

James taps the map closed, dropping to his knees to pull the invisibility cloak out from under his bed. He'll have to come up with some excuse to explain his disappearance to the others later, he has no idea what it'll be but he doesn't bother trying to figure it out now.

Marlene is still talking to Sirius when he gets back downstairs, Remus reading while Pete goes over the party list. James slips out the portrait hole as a fifth year girl slips in.

It's cold out, James didn't think to grab a jumper. He stashes the cloak in a spot he knows by the whomping willow before jogging down to the quidditch pitch. He sees the snitch first. Tiny and gold, blinking in the moonlight and then—out of the dark—Regulus. James walks onto the field, watching Regulus let the ball go again, watching him wait for it to speed away before he starts doing laps around the pitch. The absolute lunatic. James considers calling up but decides against it, instead he sits down on the grass and waits.

It's incredible really, watching Regulus find his target even in the near pitch black. James only catches glimpses of him here and there, the rest of the time he blends in with the sky. Disappearing into the stars. *Fitting*, James thinks.

His stomach lurches a little when Regulus finally starts to come down, the calm that had washed over him while he'd been watching quickly falling away.

Regulus doesn't see him at first, landing gracefully and pausing for a moment, looking at the snitch in his hands. James waits, wondering what it is that's caught Regulus's attention and then, watching as the other boy carefully slips the ball into his pocket.

"I can't believe you're stealing a snitch," James says, stepping forward.

Regulus jerks around, hand going right for his wand like it had the night James surprised him in the tower. Always ready for an attack.

Even in the dim light James can see the surprise on Regulus's face before he quickly locks it down. Expression becoming flat, unreadable. And he knows he should say something, now that they're here, knows that that was the whole point of coming. But for a minute all he can do is stare—Regulus is windswept, still breathing heavy from flying, his grey eyes filling with the moon.

Regulus drops his broom, arms crossing over his chest, same blank expression on his face. "Lovely night for some queer bashing, huh?"

James physically rears back at that—at the spite that manages to bleed into Regulus's voice despite his attempts to keep it level.

"What?"

"Don't take too long yeah? I have things to do. Oh, and if you could try not to get blood on my jumper I'd appreciate it. I'm quite fond of this one."

James is still reeling. "What—do you really think I would—" but then, then something else hits him. "Has someone done that to you?"

Regulus's mask slips ever so slightly, and even though he pulls it back James still sees. Still knows what it means. His hands curling into fists.

“Who?” the word is practically a snarl. Regulus doesn’t say anything, doesn’t move. “Who was it Reg,” he takes a step forward and that seems to wake Regulus up.

“Oh, leave off it,” he sounds irritated. “I don’t need you to defend my fucking honour Potter.”

Which isn’t nearly good enough. Because the idea that someone would—that they had done that, to Regulus—

“So,” Regulus’s eyes run him up and down, sneering in a way that James hasn’t seen in a while. “Not here to mess me up then, just here to... what? *Talk?*” he says the last word with a great deal of contempt. “I’d rather the beating if I’m being honest.” James is still too busy trying to get his anger under control to come up with any kind of response to that. “I’ll save you the trouble,” Regulus goes on, holding his hand out over his broom and summoning it into his palm without uttering a word. “You’re not gay, you didn’t even touch me. You’re welcome. Now, if you don’t mind, I’m tired and I want to go to bed.”

The problem is, well, one of many James thinks, is that he’s not much of a planner. Sure, pranks and parties he does alright with. Though if he’s honest, that’s really Remus’s influence. James has always been more of a gut feeling kind of person. Act now, think later.

So you see, he isn’t thinking when he reaches out, frustrated with Regulus for walking away. Walking away *again*. For not giving him a second to breathe. Or think. Mostly he just wants him to wait. But he doesn’t have a plan. He isn’t thinking. He’s following his gut. So when Regulus stumbles back towards him he doesn’t know how his hands find their way to the other boy’s face, doesn’t remember deciding to move forward, to press into him. Lips crashing together.

This kiss is different. This time James feels all of it. Every inch of his body humming as Regulus opens his mouth and lets him inside. All James can think is *yes*.

Yes this.

Right here.

Stay right here.

Where I can keep you safe.

Regulus’s nose is cold but the rest of him is still so warm and James can feel it pouring into him, filling his chest. There are universes in this kiss. It is big. Gigantic. His hands slide into Regulus’s hair. He smells like fall. Like quidditch.

James barely registers it at first, the hand on his chest, flat and pushing, not hard but persistent. Stubborn. Eventually forcing a space between them that James doesn’t want. Their breathing fills the quiet, their heads bowed close but no longer touching. Regulus’s hand flat on his chest.

“No,” Regulus says, finally.

“No?” James instantly steps back.

Regulus shakes his head, reaching down and picking up his broom by hand this time. “I’m not doing this.” He turns around and starts walking back towards the castle.

“What?” James demands, following after. “You started this!”

Regulus lets out a huff. “I didn’t, actually. *You* did. Forcing yourself uninvited and unwanted into my life. At least *I* was drunk, what the fuck is your excuse?”

James ignores that last question. “If you didn’t want me there you would have gotten rid of me and you know it,” still to Regulus’s back.

“I tried.”

“Bullocks.”

“Merlin, keep your voice down would you? I’d rather not have to deal with Filch catching us.”

Which, really, Regulus should have known was a mistake.

“Oh no, wouldn’t want to get in trouble, spoil that spotless record,” James purposefully raises his voice to a near shout. “It would be terrible if someone were to look out here and see two STUDENTS OUT OF BED.”

“Shut up!” Regulus whips around, pulling James up short. “*Salazar*, what is it you want Potter?”

Which is an annoying and unfair question James thinks, because quite clearly he has no idea.

“I want to talk.”

“About?” Regulus demands, thoroughly exasperated.

James returns his tone. “I don’t know Reg, this, us, this—what happened in the tower. Listen, I—“

“No,” Regulus says forcibly. “No, see *this*, is exactly what I meant when I said I don’t want to do *this*.”

James falters for a moment. That Regulus hadn’t meant it—hadn’t meant to kiss him—hadn’t crossed James’s mind before now. Which he suddenly realizes is maybe a little self absorbed, because Regulus *had* been drunk. Except the look on his face afterwards had made James so sure...and then just now, the kiss *just now*. That kiss had been meant. On both sides. He’s certain. Almost. Mostly. Maybe...

“I—“ he drags a hand through his hair. “Okay,” he says finally. “If you don’t want—sorry, I should have asked before I just—” his heart is doing this weird thing where it stops every time he tries to get a word out.

And for a second Regulus seems to soften. “Oh honestly, bloody Gryffindors. I’m not—that’s not what I’m saying.” James just looks at him, not trusting himself to speak. “Really James, what do you want? What were you hoping to accomplish here?”

James sighs. “I don’t know.”

“Brilliant.”

“Listen, you ask a lot of questions for someone who doesn’t give a lot of answers Reg.”

Surprisingly, the younger boy seems to accept that. Grey eyes intent on James. “How do you think this goes Potter? You think we’re—what? Gonna walk down the corridor holding hands? Snog in the library?”

James’s chest aches. “I don’t know, sure, if that’s what you want.”

Regulus stares back at him, blinking before a cold laugh bursts out of him. “Jesus Christ,” he turns away from James but doesn’t start walking again, broom forgotten on the ground as he brings his hands up to his face. They stand there for a minute, just like that, James entirely unsure of what to do with that reaction. “You know what your problem is?” Regulus says finally, turning back around. “Nobody has really fucked you up yet, and they’re going to, one day, but it’s not going to be me. I don’t want that job, give it to someone else.”

“Reg—“ but he’s on a roll now.

“Have you even considered how people would react—how absolutely absurd everything I just suggested is? Have you thought about - fuck, I don’t know - your parents?”

Which takes James by surprise because no, he hasn’t. Not at all.

“I know, I *know*, they’re perfect and lovely and selfless, but they’re still purebloods, still from old families, and you are their only son. You really think they’ll be okay with you being a poof? Or,” he laughs again, all twisted and sharp, “or my brother, who may have disagreed with our parents on many things but not this.”

“Reg—“ James tries again, stepping closer, not entirely sure that Regulus is taking full breaths between his words.

“Which is to say nothing of the fact that the boy you have chosen to fuck everyone off over is *me*.”

“What’s wrong with you?”

He doesn’t think about it, of course he doesn’t, the words just coming out him. Because he means them. But for some reason those are the words that break through, the words that get Regulus to slow down for one bloody second. Not that they do anything to soften the hard look in his eyes.

“Don’t act dumb James,” he says finally, sounding tired. “It’s beneath you.”

James shakes his head, taking in a shaky breath. “Look, you’re right, I haven’t thought about...any of that.”

Regulus exhales, looking about ready to bolt again so James talks fast.

“I just thought—listen, you want to know what I want? I want to talk to you, not just right now, but all the time. I—I miss you. I miss talking to you. I haven’t been sleeping,” James admits, and when Regulus looks at him questioningly he explains: “I have these... nightmares. But you, I don’t know, being around you, it made me feel okay again, it made me feel—fuck, safe? And you’re right, my life has been easy, I know that. But I’ve seen enough to understand that good things are rare. And you’re,” he looks at him, trying to lay all the thoughts he can’t articulate bare in the space between them. “You’re good Reg.”

The other boy just stares back at him, eyes wide, and James feels like his chest is going to burst open, his ribs aching in his skin.

“James—“

“Think about it, okay?” James cuts him off, too afraid of how sad he sounds. “Come to the astronomy tower tomorrow night.”

Regulus is impossibly still, a deer in the headlights, looking at James like he’s never seen him before. James swallows with difficulty. He’s too much, he knows he is, always has been.

Slowly, Regulus nods.

“Okay,” James exhales, mostly speaking to himself. “Okay, good.”

This time, when Regulus starts walking away, James doesn’t try to stop him.

The wind feels colder now, James shivering as he wraps his arms across his chest. He wonders if everything will feel colder now. After Regulus.

The next day is a bit of a blur. James doesn’t get much sleep but that’s par for the course at this point. He looks for Regulus at breakfast but doesn’t see him. Marlene gives him shit about not coming back with the plays, and Sirius demands a full explanation.

“Just needed some fresh air.”

“Fresh air? Is that some kind of euphemism I’m not aware of?”

James just shrugs, doing his best not to meet Remus’s knowing stare.

“Prongs—“

“Hey, Sirius, don’t you have to show me those records your uncle sent you?”

James sends out a silent thanks to the universe for Remus bloody Lupin.

He drags himself from class to class all day, retreating to his room when it's over and doing his best not to absolutely lose it.

"James?" Peter comes up at one point, James is lying on his bed, tossing his snitch up and down, curtains drawn. "You—uh—you okay?"

"Fine. Not feeling well."

"Oh—okay, do want something or...?"

"I just want to sleep."

"Right, right, yeah okay."

He listens as the door closes, then grabs the invisibility cloak and heads for the tower.

He waits facing the door, elbows on his knees, hands clasped. He should have brought something to do—to distract him. Not that anything could have. Still.

It'll be okay, if Regulus doesn't come. It will. Better actually, probably. So. His knees bob up and down impatiently as he runs over every stupid thing he said the night before and every stupid thing he didn't say but absolutely should have. He doesn't know how he's got himself here or how something he didn't even know he wanted a week ago now feels so—so important.

He sighs, dropping his head into his hands and pulling at his hair. *Fuck*, he thinks, *fuck*, *he's not coming is he? But that's okay*, he reminds himself. *Better even.*

It's pathetic, how quickly his head snaps up when he finally hears the door open, how instantly he fills with warmth at the sight of Regulus - stiff and uncomfortable, but here. So very here. James feels himself still for the first time all day. Because at least if he's here they can—they can deal with this. At least if he's here then James isn't in this on his own.

It's several moments before Regulus clears his throat, still standing at the door, eyeing James warily. "No one can know."

James blinks, trying to catch up. "Okay," he says slowly.

"I mean it," Regulus pushes on. "Not my brother, not Lupin, not Pettigrew. We - whatever we do here, whatever this is - nobody knows."

James nods. "Okay. Nobody knows."

Regulus doesn't say anything else, just keeps standing across the tower, looking like he's ready to run.

"Reg," James says eventually, voice soft, a smile pulling at the corner of his mouth.

"C'mere."

It takes him a minute, so much going on behind those eyes, but eventually, eventually he moves forward. Stiff and overly studied, like he was when he was drunk. Thinking too much. Trying too hard.

He stops in front of James, grey eyes even more intense up close. And James honestly doesn't know where he gets the gaul, but he reaches up and hooks his fingers through Regulus's belt loops, tugging him forward. He doesn't really think Regulus will do it, doesn't think he'll follow. But he does. Sliding onto James's lap, and—*oh*, oh James likes that. Aloof, proper Regulus in his lap. He runs his hands up his back, coming to hold his face, thumbs brushing his cheeks. And he sees it then, this close, sees the fear and uncertainty and softness that Regulus is always trying so hard to hide.

"There you are," he says, almost a whisper, before pulling lightly on Regulus's hair, exposing his neck. He leans in and presses his mouth to the delicate skin, feeling Regulus's pulse race as a breath punches out of him.

"You're going to be insufferable aren't you?" Regulus says. James feels the words vibrate against his mouth.

"Yes," he says between kisses. "God yes."

Chapter End Notes

Now if only Remus and Sirius could get it together, amiright?

As always thanks so much for your comments! Always interested to know what you guys think!

Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

It is a well known fact that high school parties are always very chill and drama free.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Holy shit James,” Abbott practically crashes into him when they land back on the ground, slapping his back as Alice comes from behind and messes up his hair. “I’ve never seen anyone fly like that!” Abbott gushes. “We’re going to destroy Ravenclaw!”

“You did good kiddo,” Alice smiles, the rest of the team landing around them.

James just grins, big and toothy, a little breathless from the fly. Sirius rolls up beside him, knocking their shoulders together. “I give you a six out of ten, not enough showmanship for my taste.”

“You’re enough of a showman for the rest of us Black,” Frank says, pushing his goggles to the top of his head. “Okay team, I’m feeling good about that practice—Macdonald, tighten up your passes, Abbott, you still need to work on not projecting your blocks, and Potter?”

“Yessir?” James says, bringing his hand up to his forehead in a mock salute. The older boy rolls his eyes.

“Fly like that on Saturday and I’ll take back everything bad I’ve ever said about you.”

“Wait, what have you—“

“Hit the showers everybody. I expect you back on this pitch at six tomorrow morning.”

“But what have you said—“ the team disperses, Frank walking away like James isn’t very clearly speaking to him. “Alice?” he turns to the older girl pleadingly, but she only smiles, clicking her tongue.

“Sorry James, my lips are sealed.”

“Oh really, cause that’s not what I—ow,” Sirius cuts off as she smacks the back of his head on her way to the locker room.

“Merlin,” Sirius stares after her. “I love that woman.”

James makes a juvenile snort, patting his friend on the back. “She’s out of your league mate.”

“Don’t I know it.”

“Oi, Black!”

They both turn towards Mary, who is currently leaning against the entrance to the field, crooking her finger in a come-hither motion.

“Think she means me?” James asks, earning him an elbow to the side.

“I’ll catch you later, yeah?” Sirius jogs backwards towards her, still facing James.

“You better not be late you prat, we have a party to prepare for!”

“Yes mum,” he says with a cheeky grin.

James rolls his eyes, smiling despite himself. “Wanker,” he whispers under his breath, as he heads towards the locker room.

“You seem in high spirits.”

James looks over, surprised to find Marlene falling into step with him.

“It was a good practice,” he shrugs.

“Uh-huh.”

James arches his brow. “Why do you look like you’re plotting my death McKinnon?”

“I just feel like you’ve been awfully chipper the last few days. “

“I’m a very upbeat person, it’s one of my many excellent qualities.”

“One might even say you’re glowing.”

“I do have great skin.”

Marlene laughs, punching him in the arm. “I’m going to figure it out, you know.”

“Figure it out?” James asks. “You mean the secret to my great skin? Sorry, but that’s all genetics baby.”

But Marlene will not be deterred, eyes wide and bright the way they get when she spots the snitch. “She’s not in Gryffindor, I know that much.”

James lets out something between a sigh and a laugh, running a hand through his sweaty hair. “Marlene, I told you, there’s no girl.”

“Sure there isn’t.”

“Marlene.”

“James.”

He shakes his head. “You’re a menace, you know that?”

“Pretty sure that’s a compliment coming from you.”

He can’t help but grin, “It is.”

“You know,” Marlene leans into him, a strand of hair slipping out from behind her ear. “You could also just tell me, seeing as we’re mates.”

For some reason that hits too close to home, his eyes going briefly back to the spot where his best friend is still talking to his girlfriend. He does want to tell them - his mates. It would help, he thinks, help it feel real. He still isn’t entirely sure that he didn’t make it all up. Because it’s mad, him and Regulus. Brilliant, but mad.

James swallows with difficulty. “There’s nothing to tell Mar.”

She runs him over in a way that makes him feel exposed. “If you say so.”

James loves parties. He knows for some people they’re too much—the crowds, the noise—but he loves it. Every part of it. He loves the start, when everything is set up and he can’t sit still, thrumming with adrenaline and the beginning of a buzz, wondering what kind of night it’s going to be. He loves it when the first people arrive and everything is chill and quiet. He loves it in the middle, when you can barely move and you’re a bit too drunk and everything is so sweaty that it’s blurring together, like the world is painted in water colours. He loves the end, when you can’t tell if it’s the exhaustion or the alcohol that’s making you fuzzy, the sky slowly growing brighter.

“Oi! Pete, turn it up!” Sirius shouts from where he’s squashed himself between James and Remus.

It’s just starting to transition into that middle period—the room packed and everyone tipsy. James tilts his condensation covered bottle back into his mouth, feeling the satisfying burn as it runs down his throat.

“Oh, don’t tell him to touch my record player,” Remus says, straining his neck in an attempt to see between the crowd that separates him from his music.

“It’ll be fine,” Sirius waves his hand dismissively.

“Oh will it,” Remus asks bitterly. “Do you not remember what happened last time?”

There’s a pause before Sirius lets out a short bark of a laughter. “Oh God—didn’t he set it on fire?”

James snorts beer out of his nose. “I forgot about that!”

Remus doesn't look particularly happy with either of them. "Thank God Lily was there to put the bloody thing out."

James still feels his heart hitch a little at the mention of her name, but it's not like it used to be.

"Ah yes," Sirius says, taking a fairly substantial gulp of his drink. His eyes have started to go a bit hazy. "Where is the fair lady of Gryffindor?"

James shrugs. "Dunno, haven't seen her in ages."

He feels, as much as he sees, his two friends turn towards him. He stares back blankly.

"What?"

There's another beat of silence before Remus seems to shake himself awake. "Nothing, just...well...usually you know."

"I know?"

"Where Lily is," Sirius elaborates, looking mildly amused, "every minute, of every day. I used to wonder if you'd put a tracking spell on her."

James rolls eyes. "You're being dramatic."

"Well..." Remus starts.

"Oh okay, the both of you can fuck right off then."

They giggle, Sirius reaching over and messing up James's hair. "Aw, don't get all sulky on us, we're proud of you. Now," he surveys the crowd, "we just have to find you a new girl."

Something heavy fills the pit of James's stomach, "Mmm," he mutters noncommittally, trying not to think about Regulus's eyes, or his hands, or—merlin—his mouth.

"Who d'you fancy?"

James's hands tighten around his bottle. "What?"

Sirius elbows him. "C'mon Prongs, good selection here tonight," Remus makes an unimpressed noise beside them. Sirius ignores him but he's clearly bothered by it. James wonders when that started happening—when did Sirius stop finding Remus's disapproval funny?

"Oh!" Sirius snaps his fingers suddenly, which James can only assume is a bad sign. "What about Marlene? She's been flirting with you loads recently."

James tries not to laugh. "Marlene is a mate, and no she hasn't."

“You can snog a mate,” Sirius says dismissively, making Remus stiffen beside him, “besides, you two looked very cozy this morning.”

James arches his brow. “Cozy? Standing in the middle of the quidditch pitch at seven in the morning after practice?”

Sirius squints at him. “You’re very picky, anyone ever tell you that?” and then, before James can say another word, Sirius is poking Remus. “Oi, Moony, you know where Marlene is?”

“I am so not involved in this.”

“Yeah, yeah, but can you see her though?”

Remus looks at him as though he’s completely lost it. “You do realize we’re sitting in the exact same spot, so whatever you can see, I can see.”

Sirius sighs as though Remus is being terribly thick, and James has to bite the inside of his cheek to keep from laughing.

“Yes,” Sirius draws out his “s”. “But you see, I’m drunk, and my eyesight is generally shit anyway. Meanwhile you,” Sirius leans into Remus, smiling dopily, “have those beautiful big peepers to look out of.”

Remus’s face goes beet red, eyes hopping from Sirius to James, looking slightly panicked.

“Uh, thanks I guess—Sirius, could you please support your own body weight? You’re crushing me.”

Rolling his eyes, Sirius complies, pulling back and leaning against the wall behind them.

“Will you look Remus? For me, and for James, so I can get him laid?”

“I don’t need your help getting laid,” James interrupts defensively. “And I’m also not going to shag Marlene.”

But Sirius isn’t looking at him, instead he’s busy making eyes at Remus, batting his lashes like the coquette that he is.

“Please Moony?”

There are a few tense moments of silence before Remus sighs, “God, alright, sure, I’ll look around.”

“Oh, come on Moony,” James heckles as his friend gets to his feet so he can see more than a sea of legs. “I can’t believe you’re actually doing this!”

“Calm down James, I’m just looking,” Remus says as he starts scanning the room. “I’m not going to help him with anything else.”

“Fucking traitor.”

Sirius turns to him and sticks out his tongue.

“Listen Pads I don’t—oh.”

Remus's “Oh” has both James and Sirius looking up.

“What is it?” Sirius sounds significantly more sober than he had a few minutes ago.

Remus all but falls back to the ground. “Nothing,” he says, voice clipped as he downs his drink. “Or—er—I don’t know. Maybe it’ll be something later, when were’ all less dru— Sirius don’t!” Remus’s hand shoots out and grabs hold of Sirius’s wrist, tugging him back to the ground as he tries to stand.

“Damn Moons,” Sirius laughs, crashing into the floor.

If James had thought Remus looked panicked before it was nothing compared to now. “I just don’t think you’re in the right frame of mind to handle this.”

Sirius’s arches his brow. “Me? This has to do with me specifically?”

Remus bites his lower lip, not saying anything else but also not letting go of Sirius’s wrist.

“Ok,” James groans as he stands up. “I gotta see this.”

“James—“ but Remus can’t hold them both down at the same time and he seems pretty reluctant to let Sirius go.

James struggles to concentrate on the sea of faces in front of him, eyes bouncing from one person to the next, trying to figure out what the hell could have spooked Remus so bad. But nothing stands out, it’s a normal party, there’s—

“Holy shit,” he hisses, then looking down and meeting Remus’s wide eyes; “Holy. Shit.”

“Yeah,” Remus nods reluctantly, “my thoughts exactly.”

“Okay you two,” Sirius has started to try and tug himself free of Remus’s grip which appears to be surprisingly strong. “This has been cute and all, but I’d really love to know what the heck is going on.”

“Um...well...”

“James,” Remus says nervously.

“Oh come on Moony, you’re not going to be able stop him from finding out about this.”

James looks back across the room to where Mary Macdonald is currently snogging the living daylights out of a fourth year named Connor Davies.

“No one else seems to be panicking so it can’t be that bad,” Sirius grumbles, still trying and failing to shake Remus off.

“I mean, in the grand scheme of things it’s not terrible.”

“James!” Remus says desperately.

“What? It’s true!”

“Prongs?” Exasperated, Sirius collapses back against the wall, apparently giving up on escaping Remus’s hold.

James runs a hand over his sweaty face, looking down at his friend. “Listen mate, I’m really sorry,” Remus opens his mouth to interrupt, but then seems to think better of it, and instead just tightens his grip on Sirius’s arm. James reckons that’s probably a good idea, the last thing they need is to have to find a place to burry Davies’s body.

“Mary’s kind of—kind of all over Connor at the moment.”

There’s a moment in which the three of them freeze, staring at one another, the rest of the party fading into the background. And then—then Sirius starts to laugh.

“Er…”

Remus shoots James a worried look.

“Sirius?” Remus asks tentatively. “Are you okay?”

“You two,” he actually reaches up to wipe tears of mirth from his eyes. “Merlin, you two kill me—James sit down. Remus, you can let go, I’m not going to do anything, Jesus,” a new wave of laughter rolls through him.

Remus and James exchange another look before James sits down.

“Not going to lie,” James says, hand rubbing the back of his neck, “thought you were going to take this a bit differently.”

Sirius takes a swig of his drink still shaking his head.

“Nah, me and Mary are…anyway, she mentioned today that she fancies Davies, I told her to go for it,” he smirks. “Looks like she did.”

This clears absolutely nothing up for James. “I’m sorry,” he pinches the bridge of his nose. “So you two…broke up?”

Sirius shrugs. “Sure, I suppose. I mean, it was just convenience really, the two us.”

“Convenience?” Remus asks, looking just as confused as James feels.

Sirius nods. “She was around, I was around, so we just decided to…be around together? It was fun, casual, no big feelings or anything. You know how it is.”

James thinks about Regulus—on the quidditch pitch, in the tower—thinks about the way that he laughs when he can't hold it back any longer, or the way his eyes get bright when he's excited, or the way he tastes.

"No," he doesn't know how it is. He says it without thinking, which would have been embarrassing if Remus hadn't said it at nearly the exact same time.

Sirius's brow raises as he looks between the two of them, before smiling and shaking his head. "Bloody pair of poofs you two are."

It's work to keep his face neutral, breath catching in his chest. Which is stupid, because he's heard it hundreds of times before. It's not like it matters. Still, he finds it suddenly hard to meet his friend's gaze.

"Nice one Black," Remus says coldly, getting to his feet and pushing into the crowd.

"Oi—wait, Remus! C'mon, I was kidding around!"

It's too late though, the room is full and loud and Remus is lost in seconds. Sirius sighs, sinking a little ways down the wall.

"Why does it feel like everything I say just pisses him off?" Sirius rolls his head to look at James who prays his voice doesn't come out as strained as it feels.

"Probably because it does."

Sirius huffs before finishing his drink.

They sit without talking, the noise of the party swallowing them whole. It's hard to get the voice in James's head to shut up, the one that says that Sirius will never forgive him. And that maybe that's not just because it's Regulus he's been sneaking around with, maybe it's because—

He shakes his head.

No.

He knows his best friend.

Whatever Regulus says. James knows Sirius.

"I'm gonna get some more to drink," he announces suddenly, and when he doesn't get a response he looks over to see that Sirius is currently preoccupied, glaring at Moony whose across the room now, talking to Dorcas.

"Do you think he fancies her?" Sirius asks, words brittle.

James blinks, looking from Sirius to Remus and back again, feeling as though he's missed something.

“Er...dunno? Might I guess.”

Sirius doesn't respond, but the glaring intensifies.

“You know,” James says as he stands, slightly unsteady on his feet, “some smart-ass once told me torturing yourself doesn't help anybody.”

Sirius turns to him, blinking through the haze of alcohol. “What?”

James nods towards Remus. “You could just talk to him.”

Sirius plays with the cup in his hand, biting at his lower lip. “Yeah,” he says eventually, “yeah maybe.”

James claps him on the shoulder. “I'll be back.”

But he doesn't head over to the wide selection of drinks curtesy of his allowance money and Sirius's flirting abilities. Instead he takes the stairs two at a time—a risk in his current condition—stumbling his way to the bedroom.

As soon as the door closes behind him the world feels too quiet, a buzzing in James's ears he hadn't noticed before. He can feel the sweat on his skin more now that he's not surrounded by people—pulling his glasses off and wiping away the condensation. Not that the world isn't still blurry when he puts them back on.

He trips over Sirius trainers on his way to the bedside table, grabbing the map and then promptly collapsing onto his bed.

There's no reason for Regulus to be anywhere but in his own bedroom. Anywhere that James can reach him. But he checks anyway, suddenly feeling restless with the need to see him. To touch him. Because he can do that now, which is a bit mind blowing if James is being honest. And terrifying.

He bites back a smile at the sight of Regulus's name in the astronomy tower.

“Hey,” he says softly, and then laughs because jeez, he must be pissed if he's talking to the bloody map. He lingers on the letters for too long before shaking himself awake again.

He doesn't bother with the invisibility cloak, no one will notice him slipping out at this point in the night. He throws the map back into its drawer and tears out the door so fast he nearly tramples the person sitting on the stairs.

“Oh shit,” he stumbles, grabbing hold of the wall—his balance not at its best.

“Sorry, I didn't realize anyone was up there or I would've moved.”

James blinks, it's a bit dark in the stairwell, the warm light of the common room not quite reaching them. Of course, even in the shadows that red hair is unmistakable.

“Lily?” James asks, which is stupid because it's clearly Lily.

“That is my name,” her voice is scratchy, like it’s been worn out. Normally he would assume it was from the booze but then he sees her wipe at her face with the sleeve of her shirt.

“Hey?” James sinks onto the step beside her.

She laughs dryly. “What a cliché right? Crying in the middle of a party over—well, anyway.”

James feels significantly out of his element, the bass of the music below them rumbling in his chest.

“You okay?” he finds himself asking, another stupid question, with another stupidly clear answer.

She sighs, lifting her head to look at him properly for the first time, green eyes shining. Even in the moonlight he can make out the faint freckles dotting her cheeks.

“Probably not, but I don’t think you’re the right person to help.”

“Ouch,” James clutches at his heart, “right for the jugular Evans.”

She rolls her eyes. “I wasn’t trying to be insulting, it’s just...it’s complicated and you’re...” her eyes run him up and down in a way that does not feel flattering.

“I can do complicated,” James insists.

Lily looks at him skeptically. “You don’t strike me as a complicated guy Potter.”

“Pfft,” James huffs, “that’s because you constantly underestimate me.”

Her smile is weak, but it’s still a smile. She lets out another heavy breath, running both hands through her hair as she sits up a little straighter. “Oh, what the hell, Marlene and Mary are both too plastered to be of any use and I can’t find Alice anywhere.”

“She’s probably boning Frank in his room.”

Lily shoots him a look and James instantly raises his hands in surrender. “Sorry, no more sex jokes, promise.”

“Good. Besides, if they’re boning anywhere it’s in the prefects washroom, honestly Potter.”

James lets out a surprised laugh. “My bad, you’re absolutely right.”

“Try to do better next time,” she shoots him a cheeky smile out of the corner of her mouth that twists something in James’s chest.

“So,” he quickly pushes that feeling aside, “what is it that has you wasting an excellent party here on the stairs?”

Her smile fades a little. “You sure you’re going to be able to handle this?”

“Lay it on me.”

“It’s Severus.”

It takes a Herculean level of self control for James to swallow the “wanker” that usually comes out of him automatically at the mention of Snape’s name.

Lily eyes him warily.

“I see,” he says with difficulty, “him in general or did he do something specific?”

Lily drops her gaze again, picking at her tights. “It’s—I don’t know,” she chews on the inside of her cheek, struggling to explain, and James just waits, not trusting himself enough to speak unprompted.

“Listen,” she starts again, sounding incredibly tired. “I know you don’t like him.”

“I do not,” James concurs.

“And to be honest, in the beginning, I think you were a bit of a dick about it.”

“Hey! I’m—“

“—and a snob.”

“Wow,” James runs a hand through his hair, leaning back on the stairs to look at Lily properly, “don’t hold back.”

“Surely you must be able to see that?” She turns almost fully around in her seat so that they can face on another .

“He started most of the fights we had.”

Lily groans. “First of all, no he didn’t, and second of all, it wasn’t fair.”

James arches his brow. “Excuse me? What wasn’t fair?”

She waves her hands inarticulately in the air. “You two, it was never an even match,” when James continues to stare at her unconvinced she explains, “yeah, okay, Sev can be rude, but you—you are James Potter.”

“That is my name,” and he’s glad to see her smile a little.

“So nothing he ever said touched you, not really,” she keeps going. “But when you hit back—I mean you made one comment about his hair and he had the whole school making fun of him for months. And that stupid name you call him—“

“Snivellus?” James provides.

“Yes, exactly, everyone calls him that now. Everyone. Sometimes even the professors.”

James does his best to hold back a snort.

Lily's eyes are wide and bright and James loves it. He'd forgotten, these past few months ignoring her, how much he loves it—watching her go off, even when it's at him. Watching how fucking passionate she can be.

"Nothing he did every really stuck to you—every really impacted your life."

"So what?" James asks. "Because people like me more he gets to be a prick?"

Lily sighs, running a hand over her face, "I'm just saying—I'm saying you were punching down. You're rich and handsome and popular, so yeah, he made some petty remarks, but you could have just left it alone because, if we're being honest, it didn't matter to you. But instead you decided to turn the whole school against him just for the fun of it. And that, that made you a dick."

James sits with that for a moment, letting the noises of the party drift between them. Someone below is laughing and James is pretty sure he can hear the distinct sound of glass shattering. Eventually, he pulls himself upright.

"Okay," he says.

Lily looks startled. "Okay?"

"Maybe I was being a dick sometimes," he shrugs. "I wasn't—I didn't think about it like that. I just knew I could get him back so I did. It never occurred to me to let it go."

She looks at him curiously, green eyes narrowing. "Who are you and what have you done with James Potter?"

"Hey," James laughs. "I'm trying okay?"

She holds his gaze for a moment longer before shaking her head. "No, I know. Thank you, for, you know, acknowledging that."

"No problem," he waits for her to keep going and when she doesn't he leans forward, elbows on his knees, hands clasped. "You said 'in the beginning' ..."

"Huh?" Lily looks up, mind coming back from wherever it had wandered off to.

"You started by saying that in the beginning I was just being a dick, which makes it sound like you think something has changed?"

"Oh, well," he watches her try and fail to hide a grimace. "Well now he—" her voice breaks and she takes in a breath before looking back at him. "I'm not an idiot you know."

James nods. "I do know that, yeah."

"I see what he's doing and, who he's hanging out with, and I hate it," there's a pause, her mouth still open like there's more she has to say but she can't quite manage it. "It's just..." she struggles. "It's hard...to actually hate...him."

And though James personally finds Snape very easy to hate, he can understand what she's saying, at least in theory

"He's your best mate," he says simply.

Lily blinks, surprised. "Yeah, and I know how that sounds—how trivial but..."

"Hey," James stops her. "I get it, if anyone gets it it's me."

She nods slowly. "I love him is the problem," she isn't meeting James's eye anymore and he resists the urge to demand further explanation from her. "I really do, but these days I just don't fucking like him and I don't know how to handle that. Like tonight, everything was fine and then," she swallows, "and then I said something about the party which, of course, set him off on a rant about you and how insufferable you are—it was all very boring and repetitive—but then, then he started going in on Remus and I—"

"He said what about Remus?" James's voice is suddenly hard.

Lily rolls her eyes. "Oh leave it, I went off on him already, put him in his bloody place and he apologized but—but the fact that he said it at all..."

"What did he say Evans?"

She narrows her eyes at his tone. "I'm not telling you Potter, in case I didn't already make that abundantly clear."

"He's my mate," James practically growls.

"He's my mate too, actually."

"Not the same way," because honestly, the fact that Lily thinks they can even compare their relationships is laughable to James. "Besides, if you were really his mate you'd stop hanging out with Severus fucking Snape."

At that her expression hardens, and if he hadn't been angry—and drunk—James probably would have regretted it. But he doesn't.

"It's like you haven't listened to anything I've said."

"I listened," James says shortly. "Here's the thing Lily, your mate is awful. He's awful to pretty well everyone except for you. He's not just rude or—what is it you said? Oh yeah—petty. He's a bloody bigot. And what I heard you say just now is that you know that. So Gryffindor the fuck up and walk away from him already. Because him apologizing to you isn't good enough anymore—it isn't fair. Not to Remus, or to any of your other friends he's been attacking. I mean, fuck Lily, it's not even fair to you."

Lily's eyes are wide, the colour unreal as she stares at him speechless, and suddenly James feels exhausted. Exhausted by this conversation and by Snape and all the things that they aren't saying. Petty wasn't the right word for what Snape is, but neither was bigot. They have a name now.

James sighs, running a hand through his hair. “Sorry,” he says, though he’s not entirely sure what he’s apologizing for, he’s just desperate to get away—from the noise and the heat and her. Her more than the rest of it. “I gotta go.”

“James—“

There was a time when Lily calling out to him—saying his first name—would have stopped him in his tracks. But it’s not now. He’s already down the stairs and he doesn’t turn back.

Reg is reading when James finally gets to him, he pauses at the door, just watching for a moment, feeling the fingers of Regulus’s warming charm drifting over him. Some of the anger from his conversation with Lily starts to fade and when Regulus looks up, his grey eyes instantly finding James, he forgets about it all together.

“Don’t you have a party to be hosting?” the younger boy asks, marking his page as he slides the book off his lap.

“Mm,” James says noncommittally, “they’ll survive without me. Besides, I couldn’t leave you up here waiting for me all night.”

Regulus rolls his eyes. “I wasn’t waiting for you.”

“Sure you weren’t.”

“I wasn’t.”

“If that’s what you need to tell yourself,” James pushes off the wall, the world around him a little fuzzy. Regulus is wearing a dark blue jumper, which is a weird thing to notice except that usually he’s in black—or green—but this feels so much more natural somehow.

When James reaches him he runs his fingers along the collar, feeling the soft cotton between his fingers.

Regulus arches his brow.

“Colour looks good on you,” James says.

“Colour? Not very specific,” Regulus is unable to keep the amusement out of his voice.

“No,” James agrees, “still true though. I’ve only seen blue and green but both have been aces so, I’m sure the rest look just as good.”

Regulus snorts. “You’re drunk.”

“Very much, yes.”

His hand moves from the collar of Regulus’s shirt up his neck to his jaw, James’s thumb running along Regulus’s lower lip.

“James,” he says, voice a little huskier, sending a chill along James's spine, his eyes intently on Regulus's mouth, “you're drunk.”

“Mmm,” James hums again. He's learned a lot about Regulus recently, specifically about how he likes to be touched—which is slowly. He wants to see you, to know where you are. To know when you're coming. So James makes an effort to broadcast his movements at all times. He doesn't mind, even likes it—how intentional it all is.

Slowly, he lowers himself to his knees, Regulus opening his thighs for him almost automatically so that James can press forward, hand still on Reg's face.

“James,” he says again, but whatever else was going to come out of his mouth is swallowed by James's lips.

He is a tad sloppier than usual, his whole body aching at the contact.

“This is all we're doing,” Regulus says against him.

James makes a noise of protest and quickly finds Regulus's hands on his shoulders, pushing him back.

“I mean it James, this is it.”

James huffs. “Yeah, okay, okay. I'm not even that drunk,” he mutters feeling Regulus's smile as they come together again.

“It took you ten minutes to figure out how to open the door.”

James laughs into his mouth, pulling back slightly. “Bold of you to assume I can open a door sober.”

It's Regulus's turn to laugh and James eats it up, tongue lapping into his mouth, hungry for every piece.

For all his whining he's more than happy with this—with the warmth of Regulus's hands as they skate over his back, his chest, pulling at the hem of his shirt in search of skin. Regulus tastes like something sweet, his legs tightening around James, like he's afraid he's going to move. As if he would.

Regulus's pulls back from James's mouth and kisses along his jaw, down to his neck, meeting his collarbone. It all makes James groan.

“You're gorgeous, you know that?” he says when Regulus's face is once again level with his. For a second their foreheads rest against one another.

“You're drunk.”

“Yeah,” James's hand moves to the back of Regulus's neck, holding it carefully, “but it'd still be true if I was sober.”

This time, when Regulus kisses him, he sinks his teeth in, ripping a sound out of James he's never heard himself make before.

"God Reg—" he wants to be closer. Somehow. Impossibly. He wants to feel every inch of him. Wants to—

"I knew it!"

It takes a second for James's intoxicated, and very preoccupied brain, to fully comprehend that that voice belongs to neither himself nor Regulus. It takes Regulus significantly less time, his mouth ripping away from James, his whole body going still in a way that is incredibly disconcerting.

"Oh—oh fuck," the voice says again.

"Marlene?"

James, who is still on his knees between Regulus's legs, turns towards the door to find a white faced Marlene standing there, hands clasped to her mouth, head shaking back and forth.

Oh. James thinks. Oh this is...not...ideal.

Regulus, apparently no longer frozen, is suddenly on his feet, stepping around James with his wand raised and pointed at Marlene's chest.

"If you breathe a fucking word of this I will—"

"Reg—" James scrambles to his feet attempting to get between them.

"—hurt you in ways you cannot possibly imagine. Do you understand?"

"Oi! Jesus," James steps in front of Marlene hands raised as he meets Regulus's stone cold stare. Gone is the soft boy he'd been wrapped up in only seconds earlier—his mouth still red from James's lips, hair still mussed from his hand—the person in front of him is all sharp edges.

"Reg, put that away," James swats at his wand but Regulus quickly steps out of his reach. There is something feral about Regulus, like a wild animal who's just been backed into a corner. "Regulus," James repeats louder, "put the wand down. Now."

For a second he thinks Regulus might actually curse him, which—well, James doesn't know what he'd do with that—but after a few more intense moments of staring Regulus lowers his wand.

James exhales, turning to Marlene who still looks thoroughly freaked out. "Mar," James nods towards the door, "lets talk, yeah?"

She nods, understanding immediately and moving towards the door.

“I’ll be back,” James says to Regulus and when he doesn’t get a response he pauses, halfway through the door. “Reg?” he waits until grey eyes meet his. “I’m coming back okay? Just—wait here yeah? Please?”

It’s small and stiff, but eventual Regulus nods, James’s chest aching at the blank look on his face.

“James,” he’s barely taken two steps into the stairwell before Marlene is on him, hands grabbing hold of both of his arms. “James I’m so sorry, that was so stupid of me I don’t know what I was thinking—I’ve been drinking and then I saw you sneak off and I just—my stupid brain thought it would be funny. I didn’t think—I didn’t think—“

“Woah, okay, I’m going to need you to breathe, alright?” he ducks his head so he can meet her eyes.

She nods, taking in a deep breath and letting it go shakily. “Shit, shit,” she looks at James again. “James, that was Regulus Black.”

“Yeah,” James’s chest gives a small squeeze at the look on her face, her eyes the size of dinner plates.

“Does Sirius know?”

The ache grows. “No.”

“Shit,” she shakes her head again. “Shit James, he pulled his wand on me.”

“Yeah, I know, he does that.”

She lets out an outraged noise. “He threatens you!?”

James feels a small swelling of warmth at the sudden protectiveness in her eyes.

“No, no that’s not what I meant. He’s just—he’s jumpy.”

Marlene looks like she doesn’t quite believe him. “This—God James, I did not see this coming when I guessed you were wooing someone.”

James wrinkles his nose, “Still not a fan of the term wooing—and believe me, the feeling is mutual. It just sort of...happened.”

She lets out a low whistle.

“Yeah, listen, Mar? You can’t—you can’t tell anyone about this, okay?”

Though James wouldn’t have thought it possible, her eyes get bigger. “No—no I won’t, of course I won’t.”

“Thanks I—I appreciate it,” he offers her a weak smile before nodding over his shoulder. “I should—er—go make sure he’s okay.”

She nods slowly, reluctantly letting go of him. “Right, yeah, of course.” She takes a few steps down the stairs before stopping. “I really am sorry James.”

But he waves her apology away. “It’s fine—I’ve done stupider things.”

He waits until she’s out of sight before he opens the door again.

Regulus is standing at the ledge, back to the door, arms stiff at his sides. The sight makes something in James’s stomach twist. They stay like that for too long, James not knowing what to say.

“Well?” Regulus asks coldly, without turning around.

“She’s not going to tell anyone.”

Regulus scoffs. “And you know that how?”

“She said so.”

“That doesn’t mean anything James,” it sounds like he’s forcing the words between his teeth.

“She’s my friend.”

“That doesn’t mean anything either.”

“It does to me,” James says simply. “It does to her too—Reg, look me?”

He steps closer but not too close. He wants to reach out but he doesn’t.

It takes a while, but eventually Regulus faces him. It’s hard, to see the mask so firmly back in place. The walls so thick and high around him that James doesn’t know how he’s going to get back over them.

“I’m not going to let anything happen to you okay?” he doesn’t know where the words come from exactly, only that he wants to take some of the fear out of Regulus’s eyes.

“Don’t make promises you can’t keep James.”

“I won’t.”

Another moment passes before Regulus sighs, his shoulders sagging as he brings his hands up to scrub his face. “You really believe that don’t you? Just like you believe you can trust McKinnon?”

“I do and I can,” James says simply. Hoping, somehow, he’ll be able to get Regulus to see—see that he isn’t alone. That everyone isn’t trying to punish him.

Regulus drops his hands away from his face. “I’m tired,” is all he says.

James nods. “Okay.”

Regulus grabs his book from the ledge, very determinedly not looking at James as he walks towards the door.

“Regulus?” James calls to him before he can disappear, relieved when the younger boy actually stops. “I’ll see you tomorrow yeah?” trying to keep the fear out of his voice.

Eventually Regulus’s eyes seem to find their way back to him. “Yeah,” he sounds worn through, “you’ll see me tomorrow.”

And somehow that manages to take the edge off the sound of the door slamming closed.

Chapter End Notes

Hello lovelies,

This chapter is one of those where when I wrote it I was like "Wow, amazing **chef's kiss**" and then every time I've read it since I've liked it less and less, so hopefully it still turned out okay!

Thank you for the comments they make my day!

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

TW injury

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Regulus is complicated. It isn't that James is completely lost, he has been friends with Sirius since he was eleven. But it's...different. Regulus does come back, the night after Halloween, but he brings the telescope and holds himself apart from James. They talk, it's nice, but it's...stilted. Regulus never lets either of them get too close, doesn't laugh too loud, doesn't say anything important.

James wants to talk about it—about Marlene, about Regulus's reaction, about how they can be more careful in the future. But he's met with silence. With an unreadable expression. With empty eyes.

They don't touch. Which is okay, except James doesn't know what's allowed here—what Regulus wants. Where the boundaries are. Regulus keeps coming back, just like always, he smiles at James and it feels like he means it. But he keeps the walls up and the mask on, and sometimes James feels like maybe they're just good friends. Hell, maybe they're just acquaintances. And that—that hurts more than he would have expected.

It's just...it had felt big. Whatever was happening between them. It had felt like standing on the precipice of something and now...now James is just...waiting.

“Aw, brilliant,” Sirius says as he tears into another package from his uncle. James doesn't miss the way he carefully folds the accompanying letter and slips it into his pocket. He knows how much this means to Sirius, having someone that's his. Knows that there's part of him that wants to keep it that way, sharing some of it with the three of them but keeping the rest for himself.

“Moony, verdict?”

Sirius turns the muggle record around so that Remus can see it on the other side of the table.

Remus looks up from his breakfast, smiling as much at Sirius's excitement as he is at the record.

“No way—I've been looking for that Fleetwood album for ages!”

Sirius preens and James quickly ducks his head, trying to hide his own smile. He was worried at first, but so far it's been really good, this thing with his uncle. The impromptu pranking has certainly been on the decline. Which James is a fan of, if for no other reason than he hates being left out.

“You’ve got a free period in the afternoon yeah? We can listen to it if you want?”

Remus blinks, forkful of egg missing his mouth, “Ah—yeah, sure, yeah. We can do that.”

“Cool,” Sirius nods, eyes already back on the track list.

Without meaning to—or maybe completely meaning to—James finds himself searching the Slytherin table. Gaze stopping at the sight of dark curls and grey eyes. Regulus is sitting with Crouch and Rossier, smirking at something one of them said, looking every inch the Black prince he’s supposed to be. It’s hard sometimes, making the two versions of him fit together in James’s head. He’ll see Regulus in the halls and he won’t even recognize him. It’s a bit frightening if he’s being honest.

“Morning,” Lily slides into the seat beside James, jolting him out of his thoughts and nearly making him choke on his breakfast in the process.

All four Marauders turn to stare at her in mild shock as she starts filling up her plate.

Peter leans over towards Remus and very loudly whispers; “has James finally imperiused her?”

James scowls at him while Sirius barely keeps it together beside him.

“Problem?” Lily asks, taking a bite of her toast like this is the most natural thing in the world.

While James knows for a fact that he hasn’t imperiused Lily, he is not at all certain that somebody else hasn’t.

“Of course not,” Remus jumps in when the rest of them continue to stare at her like she’s the Giant Squid and not a girl they’ve had classes with for the past five years. “How’re you doing with the potions revising by the way?” Remus presses on as he starts cutting up his bacon again. “I’ve been meaning to ask if you’re free for a study session this week?”

Lily nods, chewing thoughtfully. “I can probably do Thursday at lunch?”

“Brilliant.”

The rest of them slowly go back to their breakfasts as well, except for Peter, whose eyes have grown to about twice their normal size as they bounce between James and Lily.

“Alright Potter?” Lily asks after a few minutes of awkward silence.

James almost laughs. “Yeah, I’m alright. What about you, hit your head recently? Drink any funny tasting pumpkin juice?”

Lily rolls her eyes. “I don’t need to sustain a brain injury to want to sit with you at breakfast.”

Now James really does laugh. “I think that might be the nicest thing you’ve ever said to me.”

A crease forms between her eyes and she frowns. “Is that really the nicest thing I’ve ever said to you?”

“Lily, I’m joking.”

“Are you?”

James sighs, running a hand through his hair. “Well, to be fair to you, I haven’t really given you a lot of opportunities to be nice have I?”

Lily continues to frown, poking at the food on her plate before speaking again; “I think I got so used to you being...”

“An arrogant toerag?” Sirius supplies from James’s other side. James elbows him in the ribs.

“Oof,” Sirius grins through the pain.

“Sure,” Lily smiles despite herself. “I was so used to you being an arrogant toerag that I didn’t realize when you stopped.”

“He’s stopped? James, you should have told us! I had business cards made up and everything.”

James turns to glare at Sirius. “You can leave you know?”

“Could yeah, probably won’t though.”

“Sorry,” James returns his attention to Lily. “You were just singing my praises.”

“Not sure that’s what she was doing,” Remus says, looking entirely too amused by the whole situation.

“I mean,” Pete scratches the back of his head, “pretty close though, for them at least.”

“I’m just trying to say,” Lily is clearly enjoying herself. “That what you said the other night, it was pretty spot on.”

James smiles, though he has to admit that this was not exactly how he was expecting Lily to react to him telling her off. “Told you I could do complicated,” he says.

“You did. So I thought, maybe,” she trails off, shrugging. “Well, Marlene is really rather fond of you, and so’s Mary and Remus—“

“I’m still on the fence about him personally,” Sirius pipes up.

“Literally no one asked you.”

“I thought,” Lily continues, ignoring them, “we could try to be, y’know, mates?”

James can feel the shock on his own face. “I—yeah, yeah okay. Mates sounds good.”

Lily nods. “Good.”

None of them seem to know what to do then, all sitting awkwardly staring at one another.

“Should we shake on it?” James asks with a grin, attempting to fill the silence.

Lily laughs, which he has to admit, is rather satisfying.

“Do you start all your friendships like business deals?”

He shrugs. “Just feels more official that way.”

“Well, in that case, you’ve convinced me,” Lily holds out her hand and James takes it, feeling a small part of him shiver at the contact.

“Wow,” Peter says from across the table. “I really, honestly, never saw this coming.”

Remus, however, is looking very smug, turning his gaze on Sirius. “You owe me ten galleons Black.”

“You bet on this?” James asks indignantly, at the same time that Lily says; “Only ten Galleons Remus? Really?”

He shrugs, holding out his hand as a very grumbly Sirius starts digging through his pockets. “You were very adamant about your desire to drown him at the bottom of the lake, made it hard to feel confident.”

James turns slowly to look at Lily, arching his brow. “I’m sorry, you wanted to what?”

Lily rolls her eyes, waving around a fork full of pancake. “I was joking, obviously.”

“Obviously,” James repeats, trying to hide his amusement.

“You’re two short Padfoot,” Remus says, hand still held out expectantly.

Sirius lets out a melodramatic sigh. “Well I’m not an heiress anymore, I don’t just have galleons to throw away.”

“An heiress is a girl,” Peter corrects, mouthful of food. “You’re just an heir—or, er—you were just an heir.”

Sirius rolls his eyes. “There’s no flair to “heir” it’s so dull, so short. Nothing exciting happening.”

“I have to agree with Sirius,” Lily says. “Heiress is way more fun.”

“Thank you Evans.”

James looks between the two of them before taking off his classes and rubbing his eyes, not entirely certain he isn't dreaming. Not only has Lily Evans elected to have breakfast with them, she's getting along with...Sirius?

"Pads," Remus says, bringing the conversation back. "I know for a fact you have two more galleons, pay up."

"Listen Moony, Moons, my love, my darling, my one and only—"

"I am not accepting flattery," though his cheeks have gone a very dark colour of crimson.

They stare at one another for a moment before Sirius eventually breaks, turning to James.

"Prongs, can I borrow—"

"I am not giving you money to pay off a bet you made against me you traitor."

"It wasn't against you per se."

Remus snorts, earning him a pointed look from Sirius. "Jamessssssssssss, come on, do me a solid."

But James shakes his head, struggling not to laugh. "No fucking way."

Sirius sighs. "Alright," turning back to Remus. "I'll see if I can scrounge the rest up when we get back to the room you tyrant."

Remus snorts, shoving his galleons into his pocket.

It's a bit mad really, James thinks, sitting there between Lily and Sirius. Mad that this is happening. That it works. Though James would never admit it, he would have bet against it too.

"So," Lily asks, reaching across the table for the orange juice, "are we going to beat the shit out of Ravenclaw this Saturday or what?"

It's Sirius who responds first, his barking laughter ringing out so loudly James is almost certain he's going to lose hearing in his left ear.

"Oh I knew I liked you."

Usually James waits for Regulus, periodically checking the map to see when he goes up to the tower, but for whatever reason he's too impatient tonight. He walks around the halls instead, avoiding Filch, stopping to talk to Frank.

"Technically I should be docking you points for wandering the halls," he says, half-way through a discussion on Ravenclaws' weaknesses.

James just grins. “You wouldn’t do that to your favourite chaser would you?”

Frank gives him a flat look. “Just don’t cause any major catastrophes.”

“I’ll do my best.”

By the time he makes it up to the astronomy tower Regulus is there, standing in front of his telescope, expert fingers toying with the dials. He explained to James one night, what they all do. James had liked listening to him, had liked watching Regulus wave his arms around, his face bright, passionate. James hadn’t understood a word of what he was saying mind you, but...that had been a good night.

“Fancy meeting you here,” he says as the door closes behind him.

Regulus doesn’t respond, or react at all really, which seems cold even for him. James waits for a second but when nothing is forthcoming he makes his way over to the ledge, sitting down facing Regulus. It’s not that Regulus hasn’t been quieter recently, since Halloween, but something about this feels different. The air between them tight, like a string pulled to its breaking point.

“Reg?”

“James.”

The cold tone makes him flinch. He still can’t really see Regulus’s face, half hidden behind the telescope, looking up at a family that doesn’t exist anymore. James’s leg starts to bounce nervously.

“Has—are you okay?” he asks.

“Yes.”

James again waits for more and again gets nothing.

“Are you sure? Because I’m getting some very distinctly not-okay-vibes over here.”

James wishes that he could go back to listening to Regulus talk endlessly about his telescope, or his favourite quidditch team or the best flavours of ice cream at Florean’s. He wishes that he didn’t feel like he was standing on thin ice, praying it didn’t crack.

“I’m fine,” Regulus answers shortly. James hates being so close to Regulus and at the same time feeling like he has no idea where he is, or how to reach him.

But then Regulus speaks again, unprompted for the first time all night.

“You and Evans seemed to be getting along well at breakfast.”

James blinks, thrown. “I—yeah, yeah she wants to be mates so...that’s...nice?”

“Mates,” Regulus repeats mockingly, pulling away from the telescope for the first time.

James arches his brow. “Is that a problem?”

“No, the opposite really,” except that his voice is full of so many sharp edges that James is having a hard time believing that. “I’m sure there’ll be a parade or something. The Minister will probably make it a national holiday.”

James is well and truly lost now. “What are you—” and then it hits him. “Wait, are you jealous?”

Regulus stiffens. “No. What would be the point? This was bound to happen eventually, she was always going to come around.”

“Come around,” James repeats, feeling a little dumbfounded. “Reg, she wants to be mates, not bloody boyfriend-girlfriend.”

“Right now,” and there, just on the ends, his voice splinters and the pain slips through. “But really it always made sense you two. So, you know, you have my blessing to—I don’t know—ride off into the sunset or whatever it is normal people do.”

“Normal people?” James is starting to feel a bit like a parrot at this point. “Reg—” he gets to his feet and instantly Regulus steps back, causing James to freeze. They stay like that for a minute, neither one of them moving.

Eventually James lets out a sigh, hands running over his face as he tries to settle the knot that’s been tying itself in his stomach. “What’s happening right now?”

He can see Regulus struggling to swallow. “I don’t know,” and he sounds so fucking sad that James almost believes him.

“She just wants to be friends Regulus,” James says with as much authority as he can muster. “And even if she didn’t, that’s all I want from her now, okay? I’m not—not riding off into the sunset with anyone—Jesus.”

“It would be easier,” Regulus says finally.

James gives him a flat look. “Firstly, I highly doubt it. Secondly, what about me makes you think I’m interested in easy?”

Regulus breaks eye contact, shaking his head and looking off to the side—into the empty night. From here it’s all sky.

“I don’t understand what you’re still doing here,” he says finally, the words sounding like they’ve fought their way out of his mouth. “I’ve been...horrible to you.”

That surprises James. “You’ve been scared, it’s not the same thing.”

Regulus lets out a breath that’s almost a laugh. “Isn’t it?”

And James doesn’t know what to say to that so they just sit with it.

“I can’t—I can’t do things, sometimes.” He still isn’t looking at James, still staring into space.

“Things?”

Regulus closes his eyes, a look of frustration crossing his face, though not directed at James, he doesn’t think. “I can’t always be...here...be...touched. Sometimes I have to just—I don’t know—lock some parts of me away or it gets too much,” he lets out a laboured breath and James feels his chest ache.

“And then I saw you two this morning and I just thought—you just looked so perfect and I thought, I bet she doesn’t ever have to disappear. I bet she’s normal and well adjusted. I bet she’s nice.”

“Reg,” James says softly, slowly taking a step forward but not touching him. “You’re nice.”

He scoffs. “I’m not though, I know I’m not and I hate it. It’s just...this,” he motions between them, “it doesn’t come...naturally to me. And I want to not care, not about you or any of it. God I want to not care so badly it hurts. But I do—I do care,” he looks at James for the first time. “And I’m—” but he cuts himself off, shaking his head.

It takes James a minute to work out which words are worth saying, because he has so many of them. He always has so many of them for Reg.

“I’m not going to pretend to understand everything about you,” he says, which is admittedly maybe not the strongest start. “When you want to tell me—if you want to tell me—I’m here. But until then I—I just want you to let me be around you, however you can. Just don’t, don’t shut me out completely okay? Because this week was...hard.” He sighs, running a hand through his hair. “I feel like I’ve been out here on my own.”

There’s a pause before Regulus nods. “Yeah—yes—I can...do that.” His shoulders sag as he presses into the wall behind him, face flickering between controlled and terrified.

“Reg, can I touch you?”

The younger boy sighs, sounding exhausted. “I hate that you have to ask that.”

“I don’t,” and he means it.

Regulus eyes him for a moment, before reaching forward and tugging him close, forehead resting against James’s chest. And oh that feels good—to have him again. To hold him.

“I just want you Reg,” he says softly, kissing the top of his head. “Just you. However you are.”

Reg snorts, the noise muffled by James’s torso. “That’s a ridiculous thing to want.”

James runs his hands slowly up and down Regulus’s back, feeling the heat through the fabric of his jumper. “Nah,” he says confidently, “it’s brilliant really.”

The crowd erupts as James scores his sixth goal in the game against Ravenclaw. With Mary's other four they're starting off with a steady lead.

James feels good, I mean, he always feels good playing but, this game is different.

"Now that," Sirius says as he pulls his broom up beside him, "is the showmanship I'm looking for."

James laughs. "I live to please you."

"Damn straight."

The Ravenclaw keeper does a good job of getting the Quaffle out of his zone, launching it nearly halfway across the field.

"Merlin, the arm on that kid," he hears Sirius mutter, but James is already chasing the ball down the pitch.

The wind whips against his face as he presses himself closer to his broom, eyes zeroing in on the Quaffle. One of the Ravenclaw players tries to get in his way—a mistake—James dips under him with ease, letting his broom spiral the way he knows the crowd likes.

The Ravenclaw strategy seems to be simple enough—they have a pair of Chasers who work exceptionally well together, so they send them down the field passing the Quaffle back and forth and turning the match into a giant game of monkey in the middle.

But James doesn't want to play.

He keeps low and fast, getting himself underneath them as they move down the pitch. Frank is probably the best Keeper at Hogwarts so James isn't particularly worried about them scoring, but that doesn't mean he doesn't want to steal the goal.

They're nearly at the Gryffindor net but James smiles. Because he's figured out the pattern, which means he knows who's going to try and make the shot. And if he knows who's going to shoot that means—

"Merlin's balls—sorry Professor—but James Potter has just stolen the Quaffle!"

They weren't expecting him, so the defence he runs into on his way back across the pitch is pretty sloppy. James feints to the left, avoiding one of the Ravenclaw Chasers as he rolls up on their goal. Their Keeper really isn't bad but he's shaken—James can tell. He grins, aiming the Quaffle through the top of the centre ring.

"Another goal for Gryffindor!"

The crowd cheers again, the noise filling James up. He flies over to the stands, gliding along and high-hiving his classmates—which is technically not allowed but that's never stopped him before.

“Mr. Potter,” Professor McGonagall’s voice comes over the speakers. “Stop showboating and take your position on the field immediately.”

James looks over to the commentator’s booth and finds the rather austere older witch staring pointedly at him, arms crossed over her chest.

James’s smile widens, “Yes m’am,” he calls out, saluting her rather theatrically before flying back into the game.

The Quaffle is back in play, this time Mary takes the lead, battling it out with the Ravenclaw Chaser until she sees her opening and takes it.

“Yes!” James hisses out of breath, following alongside her incase she needs support. Not that she’s likely to, she’s dodging Ravens like a motherfucker.

“And Gryffindor is in possession again!” comes the ecstatic voice over the speakers. “Potter and Macdonald are making a joke of Ravenclaws defences this game. And it looks like—“

James has never cracked his skull open before. But he imagines it probably feels like this. At first it’s just the pressure—something heavy colliding with his head. The world blinks. His broom no longer underneath him. An incredible weight pulling his head down, down, down. At first it’s just the pressure. And then it’s all pain.

He doesn’t know where in the forest he is, which is odd, usually he’s better at not getting lost. It’s dark—almost pitch black, the moon coming down through the trees in droplets. James steps forward, realizing that he has two feet and two hands and no hooves.

Somewhere in the distance he hears a howl, head shooting up. He looks for his wand but he can’t find it.

“Sirius?” James half shouts. “Peter?” he doesn’t know how he ended up here like this, but he knows he needs to find them.

It’s hard to walk, it feels like the air is too thick, like he’s wading through water. He looks for the usually landmarks but everything is blurring together. Distorted. Identical.

“Sirius? Peter?” he calls out again.

Something rustles behind him and James whips around, but all he sees are trees and the empty dark spaces between them. The unease crawling over his skin.

He has to find the others.

“James?”

He turns around again and this time Reg is standing there, the moonlight that is dim everywhere else is bright on his face. He looks blurry around the edges.

“Hey,” James says, smiling automatically as he steps closer. “What are you doing here?”

“You said I needed to see it,” he shrugs, smirk tugging at his mouth. “Well, here I am.”

James laughs. “And what do you think?”

“Lots of trees.”

“That tends to happen in forests.”

“Honestly, I don’t feel that it lives up to the hype.”

“Wow, bold words from someone who was too afraid to come in here.”

“I wasn’t afraid.”

“Sure you—“

There’s another howl, James’s head snapping in the direction of the noise, once again seeing nothing but trees and shadows. It hits him, suddenly, why he’s usually in the forest at night.

“Reg, you have to—“

But when he turns back Regulus is gone and Sirius is in his place.

“Did you just call me Reg?” his best friend asks.

James is finding it hard to keep a grip on what’s happening, eyes bounding around looking for Regulus, not sure where he is but knowing he shouldn’t be out here alone, not if Moony—

“James? Hello? Why the fuck were you talking to my little brother?”

“Er—“ his brain feels fuzzy, everywhere he looks everything looks the same, it’s not just that they’re surrounded by trees, but they’re the same trees. He feels dizzy.

“Did you see him,” he asks finally, ignoring Sirius’s questions. “Did you see where he went? We have to get him and then we have to get out of here. Something isn’t right, why aren’t we —“

And then there’s screaming. Sirius is gone and someone is screaming. He can’t tell which one of them. He can’t tell if it’s both. He starts running, barely dodging the trees as he shoots through them, the voices getting louder.

This is my fault, he thinks.

This is my fault.

I brought them here.

He doesn’t know if it’s true but it feels true and suddenly every part of him is shaking. The screaming growing worse and worse—like their voices are being ripped apart, made into

something barely human.

I'm not going to make it, he thinks frantically as the noises strangle him from the inside out. I'm not going to make it. I'm not going to make it. I'm not going to—

James's eyes fly open as he wakes with a jolt. His chest is heaving, fingers gripping the bed as he tries to figure what's happened. Where he is.

"Prongs?"

James flinches until he sees it's Sirius and then he almost cries.

"You're okay," he wheezes, voice thin. Peter and Remus come into focus on either side of him. He's in the infirmary. Of course he is. "You're okay," James repeats, collapsing back down onto his pillows but reaching out for Sirius anyway, hand wrapping around his wrist, making sure he's real.

"Yeah, yeah 'course I am," Sirius says confused, though he doesn't pull away from James's touch. "Jesus, it's you who's not okay."

James's eyes have fluttered closed because it hurts more when they're open. "Me?" he asks dreadily.

"James?" Remus says his name tentatively and James reluctantly opens his eyes again, meeting his friend's concerned stare. "Do you...remember what happened?"

I remember being alone in the woods, he thinks.

I remember screaming.

"No, I—" his head gives a sudden bone grinding ache, the pain running through his whole body, "Fuck," he hisses under his breath, squeezing Sirius's wrist.

"Prongs?" Sirius asks nervously, stepping forward.

"Sorry," he grits his teeth, "just...hurts."

"Should I get Pomfrey?" He hears Peter ask, no longer able to see properly as a dozen black spots suddenly fill up his vision.

"Yeah, you better."

He hears the sound of the curtain being drawn back and Peter's quick steps on the stone floor. James breathes in deep, trying to get his thoughts in order.

"Someone remind me how I got here," he says eventually, eyes still closed.

He doesn't need to look to know Sirius and Remus are trading glances back and forth. The four of them barely need to use words most of the time.

"Quidditch," Remus says finally, "you were in the middle of the game, doing well, really well actually we think that's why—"

"Fucking Bones," Sirius cuts in, voice cold, "aimed the bludger right at your head."

James snorts. "That's what I get for showing off then."

"You remember?"

He starts to nod and then instantly regrets it. "Fuck—yeah, you've jogged my memory. Game against Ravenclaw, hundred-and-ten Gryffindor, thirty Ravenclaw, Mary had the quaffle."

Another thought strikes him and his eyes fly open—a mistake, but he pushes through. "We won right?" he looks at Sirius. "Right?"

But Sirius won't meet his eye.

"What! Oh come on, how? We were crushing them."

Another look is traded between Sirius and Remus.

"Well, neither of us saw it but—"

"Wait," James is look at Sirius again. "What does he mean you didn't see it?"

Sirius makes an irritated scoffing noise. "Oh come on, you really think I was going to watch you have your head nearly knocked off and then keep playing a stupid fucking game?"

James blinks, silencing the part of him that wants to say—yes, obviously, it's quidditch.

A few tense moments pass before Sirius speaks again, still not looking at him. "I thought—I've never seen a hit like that James, for a moment it really looked like..."

He hears Remus let out a shaky breath from his other side. "He's kicked off the team, Bones is."

James tries to let that sink in, eyes still on Sirius and his unnaturally pale face.

"Hey," he pulls on the arm he's still holding, causing Sirius to stumble forward—to make eye contact with him. "I'm okay," he smiles despite the blinding headache currently raging in his skull.

A pained look ripples across Sirius's face. "James," he whispers, "James I'm so sorry I didn't see it."

For a moment James is genuinely confused. "What?" and then. "Oh Jesus, Pads, this is not your fault. Of course you didn't, I didn't even have the quaffle, there was no reason to think

that thing was going to be coming for me.”

“I should have been paying more attention.”

James lets out an exasperated sigh, turning to Remus for help.

“Oh don’t look at me,” Remus says. “I’ve been trying to get him to stop blaming himself for hours.”

“Hours?” James’s brow raises. “How long have I been out?”

Sirius looks like he’s going to answer when the curtains are pulled back again and Pomfrey and Peter file in.

“Good,” the older woman says, giving him a once over. “Still remember how to talk then?”

“Was there a possibility I wouldn’t?” James asks, as she starts waving her wand over him, silently casting, what James assumes, are diagnostic charms.

“You never know with brain injuries,” she says, far too casually in James’s opinion. “No memory troubles? Name? Location? Year?”

“James, Hogwarts, 1975. I’m fine.”

“He had trouble remembering what happened right before the injury,” Remus pipes up, earning him a scowl from James.

“Hey, I’m not walking out of here just to have you have some kind of brain bleed or something.”

Sirius sends him a look from across the bed. “Brain bleed? Have you been watching muggle soaps again?”

“I don’t see how that’s relevant,” Remus huffs, cheeks pinkening.

“I heard of one bloke who hit his head and remembered everything except the name of his wife,” Peter adds.

James laughs and then quickly clutches his head. “Owe, Pete, no jokes, please.”

“Not a joke, just a fact,” but Peter is smiling anyway.

“Alright Mr. Potter,” Pomfrey interrupts, slipping her wand back into the front pocket of her apron. “It looks like everything is healing nicely, you’ll have to stay here for tonight and tomorrow, then we can reassess.”

“Oh, come on Poppy,” James whines, earning him a pointed stare. “I mean, Madam Pomfrey. I’m good, really just a little—” he tries to sit up and instantly feels a shockwave of pain wash over his whole body.

His vision goes white for a minute and the next thing he knows, Sirius's hands are on his shoulders, helping to ease him back down.

"Uh-huh," Pomfrey says from the end of his bed, arms crossed over her chest. "You're in no fit state to be going anywhere. And I'll have to talk to Minerva as well."

"Mcgonagall?" James manages to say, voice more a groan than anything else.

"Yes, you won't be able to fly for at least three weeks—"

"WHAT!"

James goes to move again but this time Remus holds him back, Sirius and Peter both looking at Pomfrey with similar expressions of horror.

"You must be joking," Sirius says, and James finds himself incredibly grateful for the shared outrage.

"Yeah, that seems really long," Peter adds.

Pomfrey looks frankly unimpressed with the lot of them. "That boy just had his skull fused back together."

"Wait—I what?"

"Despite what you might think," she goes on. "the brain is a very delicate organ, so until he is completely healed he will not be throwing himself into the sky, am I clear?"

"But—"

"Mr Black," she says harshly, eyes blazing as they zero in on Sirius. "I would strongly suggest you agree with me."

After a few minutes of struggling Sirius eventually gets out a sulky; "Yes m'am."

Pomfrey nods, satisfied. "Good, you have fifteen minutes and then you are to return to your dormitory."

"Oh come on!"

"Fifteen!"

She holds up her hand, shoving the protests back down their throats. "I do not know what mislead you into thinking this was a democracy but I assure you it is not. Fifteen minutes and then I start docking points."

No one argues, and after another sharp look at all of them she parts the curtains again.

"Shit James," Peter whistles, "three weeks—owe!" he glares at Sirius who has just smacked the back of his head.

“Not helping Pete.”

James sighs, bringing his hands up to his face, they’re cold and for a moment it feels nice.

“I don’t want to talk about,” he says eventually. “I’ll loose it if I talk about it and my head already feels like it’s splitting open.”

“Yeah, way too soon for that joke mate.”

James snorts, opening his eyes to meet Sirius’s “Sorry.”

“You need us to get you anything James?” Remus asks.

He starts to shake his head but then thinks better of it. “Nah, I don’t think so. Besides, I doubt Pomfrey would let you guys back in.”

Sirius makes an indignant “Hrrmph” noise.

“We’re Marauders, no one lets us do anything,” Peter says with a shy grin.

James finds himself smiling back. “Fair enough. I am fine though.”

Remus nods.

“FIVE MINUTES!” Pomfrey shouts from the other side of the room.

“Merlin, that woman,” Sirius curses under his breath.

“We should go, you need to sleep,” Remus says, picking up the coat he’d thrown over the back of his chair. “We’ll be back tomorrow though, first thing.”

Remus looks at Sirius, a question in his eyes, but Sirius waves him off. “Gimme a minute yeah?”

“Sure, Pete?”

Peter nods, “Don’t do that again, okay Prongs? It was bloody scary.”

“I’ll do my best Pete.”

They slip through the slit in the curtains, leaving James and Sirius alone. James arches his brow.

“James I—“

“I swear if you apologize one more time I’m going to explode.”

“Explode?”

James sighs, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Yeah, I know, it’s the only thing I could think of—I just got my head split by a bludger, cut me some slack okay?”

When he doesn't get a reply he drops his hand, looking up again.

"James," his name shakes in Sirius's mouth. "I'm supposed to have your back."

"And you do."

"I should have seen it—I should have stopped it."

"Sirius," he says with as much emphasis as he can muster. "Things happen, and despite what your mother may have told you, they are not all your fault."

Sirius makes a strangled noise. "Dick move bringing my mum into this," but he doesn't sound like he means it.

"I just think sometimes you need to be reminded that that voice in your head is her's, so you can tell it to fuck off."

Sirius laughs weakly, scrubbing at his eyes. "Jesus, alright, you sound like Moony."

"Merlin, I hope so, he's the only one of us with any sense."

"Ain't that the truth."

"Sirius Black you better not still be in my infirmary!" comes Madam Pomfrey's voice.

Sirius rolls his eyes, "I guess that my cue."

"Go, you know Moony'll have made Pete wait for you and he's probably started winging by now."

Sirius nods, but seems reluctant to go, nervous eyes still running James over.

"When you—before you woke up..." he stops, lips tugging to the side like they're fighting with themselves. "I thought—it sounded like you said Reg?"

James feels his heart stop. Suddenly he's back in the forest, staring at his best friend.

Why the fuck were you talking to my little brother.

Sirius seems to take his silence as something else. "I know it sounds mental," he huffs. "And Remus and Pete didn't even hear it but... It just, I don't know I—" he shakes his head.

"Forget it, it's dumb. It was probably just my brain playing tricks on me, yeah?"

He looks at James, clearly hoping for validation, worried he's upset him. James wants to tell him the truth. He does. Desperately.

"Yeah, probably, can't imagine why else—unless I was dreaming about quidditch or something."

"Yeah, maybe that was it."

James is well aware that people lie all the time. He does, certainly, to his mother, to his professors, to Frank. But Sirius...what is it he said? I'm supposed to have your back. That's it, that's them. They have each other's backs, always. It's...important to James. Sirius is important to James.

"Hey?" Sirius looks concerned, stepping towards the bed again. "Should I get Pomfrey? You look—"

"I'm okay," James says quickly, offering him a tight smile. "Really," he repeats, when Sirius keeps standing there unconvinced.

"Alright, alright," Sirius exhales passing a hand over his face. "Merlin, don't do this again."

James snorts. "Get hit in the head with a bludger? Wasn't planning to."

"Bludger, fist, badger—if I ever see you bleed again it'll be too soon."

"You're going soft Black," he laughs, nudging Sirius with his foot. The other boy smiles and it feels good to see.

"Don't go spreading that around, it'll be bad for my rep. As far as anyone knows I'm a selfish heartless gorgeous bastard."

"That's going on your tombstone."

Sirius grins. "It better be."

"MR. BLACK—"

"Yes I'm going!" he shouts back sending James an exasperated look. "We'll be back first thing yeah? Whether the old bat likes it or not."

"As long as you bring food with you."

Sirius scoffs indignantly. "Well obviously, we're not savages," he tosses James a cheeky wink before slipping through the curtains.

James leans back against his pillows, closing his eyes and trying not to think about the fact that Sirius heard him call out Reg's name. About how close that was. About how he wishes it was closer.

He doesn't want to go to sleep, partially because he's only just getting his bearings back and partially because he's not at all excited about what awaits him on the insides of his eyelids. The wolf, the dog, the blood. Over and over again he sees it. Hears it. He hopes it won't be this bad for Sirius, hopes he doesn't start dreaming about phantom quidditch games. He doesn't remember screaming, but then, he doesn't remember much.

He knows there was blood.

His eyes open at the sound of footsteps and ruffling fabric and he finds Pomfrey at his bedside. She smiles at him, and he realizes suddenly that the lights have been put out, the space lit now only by her wand.

“I’m leaving these here for you if you need them,” she points to two vials on the table beside his bed “This one is a pain potion, and this one is dreamless sleep. There’s one dose of each measured out here so drink the whole thing. If you need me just tap your wand twice. Now, is there anything else I can get you?” she looks at him expectantly, a formidable, but not unkind, expression of her face.

“Three weeks?”

She huffs, rolling her eyes. “Yes, more if you keep bugging me,” and then, pausing to send him a look that is all mother. “Your body needs time James, quidditch will still be there when you’re ready.”

“Not if we keep losing,” he grumbles.

“Anything else?”

“No.”

He can see her trying not to smile at his pouting, moving towards the curtains again but stopping before going all the way through.

“You’re lucky James.”

He blinks at the sudden seriousness of her voice.

“That was a bad hit and it could have gone very differently.”

“Yeah,” James swallows. “I know.”

She sighs after a moment, “for all that boy’s apologizing, you’d think he’d mention that he’s the one who caught you.”

That takes James by surprise and he has to stop himself from sitting up again. “Sirius? Sirius caught me?”

She looks back at him over her shoulder, expression soft. “Minerva was slowing you down already of course, I’m not sure if he could see that. Still, Mr. Black made sure you never hit the ground. I’m not sure I’ve ever seen anyone fly so fast.”

James’s chest suddenly feels too tight. Idiot, he thinks, because catching someone is exactly what you’re not supposed to do—it’s dangerous, it can throw you both off, you wait for the referees. You wait for the professors. You don’t put yourself in danger too. Unless your Sirius Black of course, and then that’s exactly what you do. The self-sacrificing asshole. He’s pretty sure Sirius is the most Gryffindor person he’s ever met.

Regulus snorts, but dutifully starts moving his hand again. It takes James much longer than it normally would to come to the obvious question. He cracks his eyes open, looking at the boy standing over him.

“You’re here?” he says dumbly.

“Astute as ever Potter.”

“Ugh,” James makes a disgusted noise. “No—no more Potter-ing please.”

Regulus bites back a smile. “It’s your name.”

“My name is James. You call me James all the time.”

“I’ll call you James occasionally.”

“Well, do it more.”

“You’re awfully bossy when you’re high, did you know that?”

“Please, I’m bossy all the time.”

“Maybe,” his hand stills in James’s hair and he’s about to start complaining when the hand slides down to cup his face, the touch so light James is barely sure it’s even there. Regulus lets out a shaky breath.

“You’re okay,” he whispers, more to himself than to James. “You’re okay, you’re okay, you’re okay.”

“Hey,” James says, pulling on Reg’s sleeve. “I am you know, you don’t have to sound so—“

“Don’t,” and even James’s drug addled brain is struck by the way that word comes out. “Just —“ and he can see him struggling the way he always does when the part of him that wants to keep everything sealed off fights with the rest of him.

James waits for Regulus to say more but he doesn’t, instead he leans down and presses into James’s mouth. He doesn’t think he’s ever been kissed like this before, soft and desperate at the same time.

It goes on for a while before Regulus pulls away, resting his forehead against James’s. “I hate you, you know that,” he says breathlessly.

“Yeah, tastes like it.”

Regulus snorts.

“Hey,” James goes on, “you distracted me.”

“Distracted you from what?”

James makes an annoyed noise as though it ought to be obvious what he means. “You’re here.”

“We’ve established that.”

James rolls his eyes. “Yeah, but how—Pomfrey’s like right there,” he gestures beyond the curtains.

Regulus looks a little smug. “You think you and my brother are the only people who know how to sneak around?”

“No but—” he snaps his mouth shut, unsure of whether or not he should tell Regulus about the map or the cloak or if that would just be another betrayal of Sirius somehow. To share their secrets.

Eventually Regulus shrugs. “I’m good at disillusionment charms.”

“Of course you are.”

“What does that mean?”

“I don’t know—c’mere,” he pulls hard on Regulus arm, forcing him to have to brace himself on the bed, one hand by James’s shoulder, one knee on the edge of the mattress.

“Merlin, James will you—be—careful. You just had your skull—cracked—open—stop pulling on me!”

James only smiles tugging Regulus further onto the bed.

“I’m not going to—”

“Just lie with me for a bit, that’s it Reg.”

“Oh that’s it Reg,” the other boy grumbles, practically on all fours now, hovering over James. “Pomfrey could come by anytime.”

“Yeah but you’re good at disillusionment charms.”

Regulus rolls his eyes, letting out a huff. “I can’t make myself bloody invisible.”

“I’ll distract her,” James says casually. “I’m very distracting.”

“I’ve noticed.”

“Have you?” far too pleased with himself.

When Regulus continues to hold himself apart James drops his hands, worry breaking through the potion. “Is this okay?” he asks, the world is so fuzzy right now that he’s not sure that he can read Regulus as well as he usually does.

The younger boy huffs before carefully fitting himself beside James.

“Reg—“

“It’s okay James,” he says quietly. “Stupid and reckless, but okay.”

Smiling, James wraps his arm around him, pulling him into his chest, bury his nose in his hair. “I’m glad you came,” he murmurs.

He feels Regulus exhale against his chest, “go to sleep James.”

Chapter End Notes

Hello lovelies!

I don't know about you guys but I'm a little obsessed with the Regulus / James interactions in this chapter (am I allowed to say that if I wrote them? Idk but it's true),

Also Sirius and Lily being hilarious friends is one of my favourite things so prepare yourself for more of that

Your comments are so sweet, I hope you're all having a good day!

Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

No one is having a good time.

Chapter Notes

This gets mildly spicy - so consider this your mild spice warning (by spice I mean sex)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

James is allowed to go back to the dorm after two days, but not without some conditions.

“You are to stay in bed until I say so, do you understand?” Pomfrey fixes him with a sharp look.

“Perfectly.”

“James,” there’s warning in her tone.

“Listen, I am famously very good at doing what I’m told.”

Her eyes narrow. “I’m friends with the portraits—“

“Don’t worry Poppy, this is a judgement free zone, though you may want to try getting out a bit more.”

“—if you move,” she presses on, though James can see her fighting a smile. “I will know. So if you ever want to get on a broomstick again I suggest you listen to me.”

Which James thinks is entirely unfair and certainly an abuse of power but since neither McGonagall nor Dumbledore agree with him, he finds himself confined to his bedroom. Which is made infinitely worse when Remus starts bringing him his coursework.

“But I’m injured!” he whines. “I’m supposed to be resting. Isn’t that what you all keep saying? How am I supposed to rest AND write an essay on the seven uses of unicorn hair? Those two activities are completely incompatible. What, is Slughorn trying to kill me?”

“James,” Remus sighs, collapsing onto his bed. “I will literally pay you to shut-up.”

“I’m just saying—“

“James.”

He huffs, glaring at Remus and then glaring at his coursework. “I can’t believe Pomfrey won’t let me leave this fucking room but she’s still going to make me—“

His rant is cut short by the pillow that collides with his face. Which, if Remus thinks is going to shut him up, he has another thing coming, because now James has a whole new rant about respecting the delicacy of his newly mended head.

Except, when he looks over Remus has curled onto his side, burying his face in his blankets.

“Uh—Moony? You okay over there?”

There’s a long pause before Remus speaks, words muffled by the bedding. “Just having a bad day.”

James’s eyes automatically go to the window even though he knows the full moon is still two weeks off.

“You wanna talk about?” James asks.

Remus makes a noise that might be some kind of sad pathetic laugh but it’s hard to tell from his current position. “No. I just want to wallow if that’s okay.”

“Sure Moons,” James nods even though he knows Remus can’t see him. “Whatever you want.”

Remus doesn’t emerge until it’s time for him to go down to the great hall for supper. James, of course, doesn’t get to go to the great hall for his meals but instead has to have them brought to him via house elf.

“Remus?” he calls to his friend as he’s halfway out the door.

“Mmm?”

James fidgets with the words in his mouth. “If you want to talk, at some point, any point, I’m here.”

Remus, James realizes for the first time, looks exhausted. “Sure Prongs, thanks.” He gives James a weak smile before disappearing down the stairs.

That’s the first time that James notices something is wrong.

The second time is when Sirius is doing his homework.

It’s not that Sirius doesn’t do his work. He does. Just usually he does it in a rush moments before it’s due. James once watched him pen out a four page paper on the mating habits of the Hodag in the fifteen minutes it took them to walk to class. He’s good enough that he passes,

even with his illegible handwriting. Sirius's greatest strength has always been his ability to improvise.

So it's strange to watch him sit on the floor of their bedroom, books open in front of him, silently scribbling notes in a timely fashion.

"Everything alright?" James asks when he can't take the silence anymore.

"What?" Sirius doesn't look up from the papers in front of him.

"You seem a little...tense?"

He can see Sirius's eyes still, no longer skating across the pages of text.

"Nah, I'm good," he says eventually.

James watches him, expression stern, shoulders inching up his neck as he starts writing again.

"Okay Mate," he says eventually, forcing himself to focus on his own work.

"I'm just wondering if you've noticed anything?" James asks impatiently as he watches Peter scramble around the room, desperately trying to find his wand. He misplaces it at least once a day.

"Like what?" Peter grunts as he gets on his hands and knees and starts rooting around under his bed.

"I don't know," James huffs, "just—are they fighting? I feel like maybe they're fighting?"

"More than usual?" Peter wipes the sweat off his forehead as he stands back up, still wandless. "I swear I just had it," he mutters to himself.

James rolls his eyes, picking up his own wand; "Accio Peter's wand," he mutters. There's the sound of rattling and then persistent banging as both boys turn towards the closed bathroom door.

"I swear I checked there!" Peter grumbles to himself as he walks over and opens the door, grabbing the wand out of the air on its way to James.

"What do you mean 'more than usual?'"

Peter looks back at him. "What?"

James's patience these days is at an all time low. It's the captivity, it's no good for him. So it takes an incredible amount of effort not to snap at Peter. But he knows that wouldn't end well. When he gets snippy with Remus or Sirius they give it right back but Peter—Peter just shuts down.

“Remus and Sirius, I asked you if they were fighting and you asked “more than usual.” What does that mean?” he gestures impatiently.

Peter shrugs. “I don’t know, they fight, we all fight.”

“What?” James demands, feeling slightly offended for some reason. “We don’t fight.”

Peter looks at him curiously for a minute before shaking his head. “Sometimes I feel like we’re in completely different friend groups.”

“What is that supposed to—“

“Look, I gotta go, if I’m late for transfiguration again McGonagall is going to turn me into a chicken,” Peter shivers at the thought, shoving his wand in his back pocket and grabbing the books off his bed.

“But what—Pete! Damn it,” James sighs, collapsing back onto his bed as the door closes behind his friend. “We don’t fight,” he grumbles to himself.

James is pacing in front of the window when Marlene walks in, both of them stopping dead in their tracks. Staring.

“Brought these for you,” she breaks the silence, holding up a stack of parchment that can only be more homework. James groans.

“How did you even get up here?” he grabs the work from her sulkily and chucks it onto his bed with the half a dozen other assignments he’s currently ignoring.

Marlene arches her brow. “I walked.”

“Isn’t there like an enchantment or something,” James waves his hand about. “Y’know, keeping us out of each others dorms?”

“Only on the girls, protect our virtue or something.”

“Well what about MY virtue?” James demands indignantly, making Marlene laugh.

“Guess the founders figured it was a loss cause.”

“Presumptuous bastards.”

Marlene smirks. “I can’t believe you didn’t know this, aren’t you guys supposed to know all the castle’s secrets, isn’t that like, your whole thing?” she gestures around the room.

“Our thing?” James raises his eyebrow. “I didn’t realize we had a “thing.” Also, how would we know this?”

“You could read Hogwarts a History?”

James looks at her flatly. “I repeat, how would we know this?”

She snorts. “Okay, okay, fair point. I mean, you’re telling me you’ve never tried to sneak a girl up—“ she cuts herself off, eyes going wide. “Or—shit, never mind that was—“

James rolls his eyes, waving off her words and leaning against the wall next to the window. “Believe it or not, the idea of hooking up with a girl while my three mates listen in has never sounded that appealing to me.”

Marlene blinks at him a few times before pulling herself back together. “You’re telling me Sirius Black has never brought a girl back to his room?”

“We’re broom cupboard men us,” he shoots her a grin.

“Classy.”

James nods looking out the window, trying to work through the nagging feeling now taking up space in his gut.

“It’s—“ he stops, shooting her a sidelong look, pulse suddenly hammering against his ribs. “It’s only him really.”

There’s a pause, James’s eyes following the tiny students rushing towards the green house below them to distract himself from the buzzing in his ears. Eventually, Marlene moves forward and leans on the wall across from him.

“Okay,” she says softly.

He looks over at her. “Yeah?”

“Yeah James, of course.”

He exhales a breath he didn’t know he was holding, eyes going back to the window.

“They still don’t know I gather?” she asks, gesturing to the room behind them.

“He doesn’t want anyone to know.”

“And what do you want?”

James lets out a dry laugh, passing a hand over his face. “I have no idea honestly. Even if I could I don’t know that I…” he trails off, eyes going unconsciously over his shoulder to Sirius’s bed.

“Well,” Marlene goes on carefully, pulling his attention back to her. “I’m pretty sure Remus would be okay with it.”

James can feel the confusion on his face. “Why?”

She looks at him expectantly but when she continues to get nothing in return she sighs, laughing a little. “Honestly, you lot are a mess aren’t you?”

“Oi! We do alright.”

“Uh-huh.”

“I don’t appreciate the judgemental tone McKinnon.”

She laughs, blonde hair falling in her eyes. “I’m just saying, I think if you did—if you told them,” she shrugs, “it’d be alright.”

James’s chest squeezes. “Remus maybe, Pete, honestly I couldn’t tell you, but Sirius...” James swallows. “Sirius will never forgive me for this, and I—Fuck Mar,” he runs a hand through his hair. “I don’t know if I can bare that. Him hating me.”

She reaches out, squeezing his arm. “James, you should have seen him, after you got hit.”

Something in her voice makes him look up.

“He—I mean, I knew you two were close but—he was wrecked James. I’m pretty sure if me and Alice hadn’t held him back he would’ve killed Bones.”

“I’d have done the same if it was him,” James says, because it’s true.

Marlene nods. “I don’t think he could ever hate you.”

“But it’s—it’s not just—he’s not just a boy,” James fights the way saying that out loud makes part of him squirm, want to shy away from it. He isn’t ashamed, he won’t be. “It’s his brother.”

Marlene grimaces. “Yeah, I have to admit, that parts throwing me off a bit too.”

“He’s not...”

“An asshole?”

James snorts, restlessly fidgeting against the wall, crossing and uncrossing his arms. “You know, until a week ago one of your best mates thought I was an asshole.”

Marlene rolls her eyes, “Yeah, it’s not the same.”

He looks over at her. “Isn’t it?”

And suddenly she’s too serious for James’s liking. “There are different levels of bad James. You’ve been obnoxious, sure, you’ve lacked self-awareness, but you’ve never been cruel.”

“Regulus isn’t cruel,” there’s no room for questioning in his voice, but Marlene looks back at him unconvinced—pitying even.

“Listen, I’ve had this conversation too many times with Lily about Snape, I don’t want to do it again, I’m just saying,” she sighs, sounding weary. “I’m saying that just because someone

can be good sometimes, to some people, doesn't mean that they're a good person."

James feels like someone's just slapped him. "This isn't—Reg is not Snape—he's nothing like Snape," the very idea makes bile crawl up the back of his throat.

He can see Marlene chewing on the inside of her cheek. "Maybe, I don't really know him. But do you think Snape can't be redeemable when he wants to be? That Lily would have held on to him for so long if he couldn't sometimes be a decent human being?"

"Marlene," James puts as much emphasis on her name as he can. "I'm telling you, they're different. They are." Even as he says it he can see Regulus sitting with Rossier and Crouch, cold eyes and sharp mouth. Can see him sneering at first years in the corridor. Can see Sirius alone on his doorstep.

"You're really into him huh?" Marlene's words pull him out of his thoughts.

He can't look at her, feeling sick for the first time since leaving the infirmary. When he doesn't answer he hears Marlene exhale, shifting a little against the wall.

"Stupid question that, since when is anything ever casual with you."

James lets out a weak laugh even though it feels like his chest has started to cave in on itself. "Regulus isn't Snape," he repeats again. He needs her to know, to understand. "I can see how maybe it looks that way from the outside, but it isn't the same," it can't be, whispers the voice in his head. It can't be because I'm absolutely mad for him, this boy. He makes it feel like the sun rises in my chest.

Marlene nods, "Okay, I believe you. You'd know better than me," and then a small smile pulls at her mouth. "It means something, you know, that he has you. Maybe it'll make a difference, like with Sirius."

"I didn't," his voice is scratchy and he coughs, trying to get his words back. "I didn't do anything for Sirius."

She shakes her head, bemused expression on her face. "Yeah James, yeah you did. You gave him a way out."

James thinks about Regulus, back on that first night in the tower.

I'm not my brother, he'd said.

You can't save me.

James feels those words more now than he did the first time.

They bruise.

Due to the mandatory bedrest and also his tendency to get dizzy when he's on his feet for too long, James hasn't seen Regulus since the infirmary. Which, if he's being honest, is having more of an effect on him than he would have thought. Besides the fact that he's found himself watching Regulus's name on the map almost constantly—which he can freely admit to himself is both creepy and pathetic—he's been...dreaming about him.

Sometimes they're nightmares. In the woods. In the dark. But sometimes they're something else—something with hands and mouths and a heat that whips through James like nothing he's ever felt before. He wakes up hot and panting and wanting. These days he feels like that's all he does—want.

He hasn't forgotten his conversation with Sirius in the infirmary. Hasn't forgotten what Sirius heard. These days he casts a Quietus charm over his bed before he goes to sleep.

There's a new fidgety energy that sits under his skin. He can't sit still, he paces, he plays with his snitch, he throws crumpled balls of paper across the room. He thinks and thinks and thinks. He thinks so much he's certain he's going mad.

Mostly he thinks about grey eyes and thick dark hair and a mouth that says "I bite." And he wants.

It's a few days after his talk with Marlene that Remus walks into their room to find James and Sirius sitting in the window and then promptly walks back out. At which point, James decides that he can't ignore the situation anymore.

"Okay, what did you do to Moony?" he demands.

Sirius didn't look up when the door opened or closed, eyes trained on the overcast skies, sporadic rain drops splattering the glass.

"You're not making any sense Prongs, think maybe that bludger messed you up a bit," his voice is lacking its normal teasing edge, words falling flat.

James watches him for a minute, the picture of melancholy, before reaching over and punching him hard in the arm.

"Owe, what the hell!" Sirius clutches his arm and kicks James in retaliation.

"Hey! I'm injured."

"Don't start fights you can't finish Potter," he says, kicking him once more for good measure.

"What's going on with you and Remus," James kicks back.

"Nothing."

"Bullshit."

Sirius sighs, throwing his hands in the air. “I don’t know, he’s pissed at me, he’s always pissed at me. I don’t know what his problem is.”

James’s narrows his eyes. “Wow, you’re a really shit liar, you know that?”

Sirius glares, getting up dramatically and moving to his bed, crossing his arms over his chest as he sits against the headboard.

“Are you sulking now?” James demands.

“Maybe, is that a problem for you?”

“Yes. I tried to leave it alone—“ Sirius lets out a disbelieving scoff that James chooses to ignore, “but it’s been days now and the two of you are both in crap moods and won’t even be in the same room as each other. So since you’re clearly incapable of pulling your head out of your ass you’re going to tell me what happened so I can fix it.”

“You can’t fix everything James,” Sirius snaps back, harsher than James is expecting.

“Watch me.”

When Sirius does nothing but sit there glaring James gets up and moves to his bedside, picking up Peter’s pillow as he goes. Sirius’s eyes widen.

“Don’t you fucking dare James.”

“Then tell me what’s happened.”

“Put that down or I swear I will crucio your ass.”

“Ha! You wish.”

“James—“

Sirius scrambles to the other side of the bed as James swings for his head.

“You wanker,” Sirius grumbles, rolling onto the floor. He grabs hold of his own pillow and hurls it at James.

“I wouldn’t have to be if you would stop lying to me,” James lunges across the bed at the same time that Sirius makes a run for the other side so they end up chasing one another in a circle, with James ending up on Sirius’s side and Sirius on James’s.

“Bit rich coming from you,” Sirius says, snatching the pillow off of Remus’s bed and launching it across the room. James ducks.

“What?” he says when he comes back up

“Where do you go every night James?” Sirius demands, causing a cold chill to run along James’s spine. “Huh? You take the map, so there’s no way to check, you disappear for bloody

hours. What the hell are doing?”

James stands there, pillow forgotten in his hand.

“Oh come on,” Sirius says, tone verging on mean. “Did you really think we would’t notice?”

James’s body has gone so stiff that he feels like he might crack open, a horrible foreboding feeling washing over him. “You didn’t say—“

“Moony thought we should leave it alone, that you’d come to us if you needed to,” he’s sneering but James thinks he can just make out the hurt on the ends of his words. He thinks about how he felt, finding out about Sirius’s father from Regulus.

“But it’s been weeks now,” Sirius goes on. “So what is it James? What are you hiding from us?”

James swallows. “Nothing—“

“Ha!” the noise is angry when he forces it out of his mouth. “Who’s the fucking liar now?”

Shit, is all James can think.

“I asked you first,” he says pathetically.

A look passes over Sirius’s face that he’s not sure he’s ever seen before, or if he has, its never been directed at him.

“When did you stop trusting me?” Sirius says finally, and the room feels too quiet and too hot and James doesn’t know how they got here but he hates it.

“That’s not fair—that’s not—that’s not what’s happening here,” he struggles with his words.

“That’s why you lie James, you lie because you don’t trust someone with the truth.”

It’s a fight for him not to flinch, those words carving their way through his skin. Because that’s the truth isn’t? When all is said and done, he doesn’t trust Sirius with this.

“Is that why you lie to me?” he asks instead of answering.

Sirius makes a dismissive noise. “I don’t trust anyone, it’s not the same.”

“Isn’t it?”

But Sirius shakes his head. “No, because you trust everyone. You always have. So when did you stop trusting ME.”

James doesn’t have an answer for that. Or maybe he just doesn’t want to.

“I trust you Sirius,” he says finally, quietly. “I trust you with everything.” The “else” that they both know exists on the end of that sentence hangs between them. I trust you with everything else.

“But not this?” Sirius asks even though it was never said.

James fights everything that swells up inside of him at the way those words sound in Sirius’s mouth.

“There’s no this. I can’t sleep, I wander around the castle,” he shrugs, “that’s it.”

Sirius looks at him meaningfully before an empty laugh bubbles out of him.

“Right, well,” he runs a hand through his hair, “you go for late night walks, me and Moony are completely fine. That’s how we’re playing this?”

James shrugs helplessly.

“Great. Excellent. Glad we had this talk. Feel loads better now, cheers.”

Sirius throws the door open with so much force that it bangs into the wall and James flinches when it closes behind him.

Pomfrey officially takes him off of bedrest.

“No quidditch,” she says sharply. “Not for another two weeks at least.”

James grumbles unhappily but doesn’t bother trying to fight her.

Sirius and Remus start warming up to each other again—or, at least they can be in the same room now, which James supposes is an improvement. They don’t really talk though. In fact, none of them really talk. There’s no attempt by him or Sirius to bring up the fight they had. They just...move on. That’s how they’ve always dealt with things or...not dealt with things, depending on your perspective. It feels different this time though. Like there’s something heavy sitting on James’s chest every time he thinks about it.

“I’m just saying—“

“You can just say all you want, you’re still wrong,” James says confidently.

Sirius rolls his eyes. “The Cleansweeps are lighter, more aerodynamic.”

“Aerodynamic?” James snorts. “Please, I’d take the oldest Nimbus model over the newest Cleansweep any day.”

“Well that’s because you’ve been completely brainwashed.”

James laughs. “Oh have I?”

“Mindless brand loyalty.”

James knocks their shoulders together. “Yeah, whatever you say.”

It’s late in the day, the sun is warm but getting low in the sky, James swears it’s dark by supper these days.

“Hey, do you have the notes from muggle studies?” Sirius asks.

“You know I don’t, I’m just going to nick them off of Moony.”

Sirius’s expression tightens but he nods his head. “Right, good plan.”

They’re walking back from potions. Slughorn kept them late in an attempt to once again woo them into joining his dinner parties. They, of course, refused, but it means the corridors are mostly empty, everyone else already done with classes for the day.

“Merlin, I can’t believe you just called the Cleansweeps aerodynamic,” James laughs to himself.

“Oh whatever, you snob. You just like the Nimbus line cause it’s posher.”

“I hope you appreciate the irony of you calling anyone posh mr I-took-ballet-until-I-was-nine.”

Sirius sends him a flat stare. “It was ballroom actually.”

“Oh well,” James can’t help but snicker, “in that case, that’s well rough.”

Sirius tries to trip him but only partially succeeds, which mostly ends up with the pair of them jostling down the hallway.

“Like you’re any different,” Sirius says when they eventually push away from each other, both grinning. “You know most people don’t have a whole bloody quidditch pitch in their back garden right?”

“It’s not a full quidditch pitch, it’s only—“

They round the corner and James feels his words suck themselves back down his throat as he comes face to face with a pair of wide grey eyes.

Of course, the shock on Regulus’s face only lasts for about a second before he slides his mask of casual dislike into place. Gaze quickly shifting from James to Sirius.

“Sirius,” he says coldly.

“Regulus.”

James says nothing, he figures that’s probably what’s expected of him. Which is good, because his pulse has rammed itself so far up his throat he’s not sure he could manage speaking right now.

“Well,” Sirius says after several more seconds of tense silence, “as fun as this is, we’ve gotta go so,” Sirius looks at James who nods as they start walking again, Sirius making a bit of a show of walking around Regulus who is still standing there. All and all James thinks it’s not so bad, a little awkward but it could’ve been—

“He asks about you, you know?”

Sirius freezes.

James looks over at him and silently begs him to just walk away. But Sirius’s eyes have gone dark and James knows, even before his friend starts to turn around, that there’s no getting out of this now.

Fuck.

“That’s interesting,” Sirius’s voice is so falsely casual it makes James cringe, “since he never seemed to care much about me when I was around.”

Their father, James thinks, looking between the two brothers. They’re talking about their father.

“Nobody does the right thing all the time Sirius, people make mistakes.”

And that makes Sirius laugh—cold and sharp.

“Mistakes? Is that what you think they’re making? Come on little brother, you’re smarter than that,” Sirius leers, stepping closer, James follows behind incase he has to stop them from killing each other. Both of them burn cold—when they get angry they don’t yell or bluster. They turn their smiles into knives and carve you into pieces. It fucking terrifying to watch.

“In order for something to be a mistake you have to feel guilty about it,” Sirius goes on, him and Reg have eyes only for each other.

“You know that he’s—“

“Being sick doesn’t make you a good person.”

Regulus’s eyes narrow. “There are no “good” people,” he says flatly. “There are just people. That’s it. This isn’t a fairytale.”

“Is that how you do it? How you live with yourself?” Sirius asks darkly, now far too close for James’s comfort. Regulus doesn’t respond, hands curled in fists at his sides but at least he’s not reaching for his wand.

“You’re right Reg,” Sirius goes on, neither of them looking away, not for a second. “Nobody can do the right thing all the time. But the problem with you lot,” his eyes trail over his brother in mild disgust, “is you don’t even try.”

There’s a pause before Regulus lets out a dry laugh. “What exactly makes you think you’re any different? What great injustice are you righting Sirius? All you’ve done is runaway, like a

coward,” he spits the last word out of his mouth and now James does step forward, hand taking hold of Sirius’s arm to keep him from lunging.

“You think you’re some kind of hero? You think you accomplished something the night you left? Because to me it just looks like you’re doing what you’ve always done, which is look out for your fucking self.”

Sirius jolts forward, James yanking him back as Regulus pulls out his wand.

“Hey, enough!” James shouts, pinning both of Sirius’s arms behind his back to keep him from reaching for his own wand.

Regulus isn’t looking at James, eyes intent on his brother.

“I said enough!” Sirius is struggling against his grip, trying to throw his elbows back into James’s stomach so he can get himself free. James grunts as Sirius lands a well aimed kick to his shin, feeling his grip start to slip. “Fuck—Regulus—”

“You really want to call me a coward Reg?” Sirius asks. “You’d let her use you as a fucking rug if you thought it would make her love you. It’s pathetic!”

James sees it, just barely, the switch in Reg’s grip, the look in his eyes. He throws them against the wall just as the curse shoots silently out of Regulus wand.

“You fucking psycho—” Sirius is yelling, James barely keeping his grip as he holds him against the wall.

“REGULUS PUT THE FUCKING WAND DOWN.”

Regulus looks at James for the first time and James feels the air empty out of his lungs. He doesn’t know that face. He doesn’t know those eyes. They certainly aren’t the same ones that snuck to his bedside in the infirmary and held him like it meant something.

It takes a few more seconds before Regulus puts his wand back in his pocket, eyes returning to his still struggling brother. “You’re a disgrace,” he says coldly, picking up the books he dropped in the scuffle and turning his back on them.

“Oh, fuck you Reg!” Sirius shouts after him as he turns the corner.

James’s mouth feels dry.

“Prongs—Jesus—let me go you prick!”

“Shit, sorry,” Sirius stumbles forward out of his grasp, both of them breathing heavy. Sirius glares at the place where his brother disappeared, James doing his best to get the look on Regulus’s face out of his head.

Finally, Sirius rounds on him, “What the hell was that?” he demands.

“What?” James feels off balance, like he can’t quite get a grip on the world around him.

Sirius gestures emphatically at the spot where Regulus had been standing. “Since when do you protect him?”

“I didn’t protect him,” James says automatically, which he thinks might actually be true but doesn’t make him feel any better.

“You held me back!”

“He had his fucking wand out, if you took a swing he was going to hex your bloody arms off.”

“I would have drawn mine first if you hadn’t already been pulling me away!”

James lets out an exasperated sigh, running a hand through his hair. “So what, Sirius? I was supposed to just stand back and watch you kill each other?”

“No,” he fumes. “You were supposed to fucking help me! You were supposed to have my back!”

“Two against one’s not exactly fair.”

“Nothing is fair—what about any of this seems fair to you?”

“Well now you sound just like him!”

That catches Sirius off guard, catches James off guard too if he’s being honest. Sirius physically steps back and James feels his stomach lurch. He expects more shouting but there isn’t any, after a few minutes Sirius brings his hands up to his face. The hallway feels too big all of the sudden. Too quiet.

“He just makes me so fucking angry sometimes,” Sirius says eventually. “I hate that he’s like that—that he defends them, that he plays their games. And I used to feel like I knew that he didn’t really think it was okay, any of the stuff they say or—” Sirius lets out a breath looking down at the floor for a moment, “but fuck, I don’t know anymore, maybe he does. Because he won’t fight it. Won’t stand up for himself. Won’t stand up for anything. It drives me nuts.”

James feels suddenly exhausted, head swimming in a way he decides to blame on the bludger instead of Reg. He’s not sure what to say, what to do.

“Listen don’t—don’t bite my head off for this yeah?” James starts, which gets a snort out of Sirius.

“Strong start.”

James grimaces. “Have you tried...talking to him? I mean, actually talking to him? Not just shouting insults at each other or whatever that was,” he waves vaguely at the empty hallway around them. “Talking to him outside of that house?” Sirius stiffens at the mention of Grimmauld place.

“You can’t talk to him,” Sirius says simply. “He’s a wall. It’s all family and duty and when I try and ask him what he actually thinks he just shrugs me off. Like it’s not important,” Sirius laughs dryly, digging the heels of his palms into his eyes. “Like thinking isn’t important. Which is what they want you know, fucking mindless zombies who’ll do whatever they say. I could never do that—could never hollow myself out the way he could.”

It takes a lot of work for James to hold himself still, to keep from flinching. He thinks of Regulus up in the tower, talking about having to hide parts of himself away. How it made things easier. And he wonders how much of himself he puts in boxes.

“Maybe if he knew he had somewhere he could go...”

Sirius’s eyes snap up and James tries to look casual.

“My mum, this summer, she said something—well, she said she was going to try and get him out of there—“

“Regulus?” Sirius demands, surprised.

“You know her,” fighting to keep his voice level. “She’s gotta save everyone.”

It’s a moment before Sirius nods. “Yeah. You’re like her that way.”

James doesn’t know why that aches. “Bloody annoying I expect,” he offers Sirius a weak smile that his friend returns.

“Yeah, it is, but...you know, saved me so...can’t really complain.”

James rolls his eyes. “Please,” he says around the lump in throat, “you’re Sirius Black, you saved yourself.”

“Oh fuck off James, stop trying to make me cry in the middle of the bloody corridor,” he laughs as he punches James in the arm.

“Told you Black, you’re going soft.”

“Yeah, yeah, like you aren’t a bleeding fucking heart.”

“Merlin,” James says as they start walking slowly in the direction of the common room, “we’re turning into Hufflepuffs.”

Sirius gives him a look of outrage. “Bite your tongue.”

This time James laughs big.

He doesn’t know whether to go to the tower or not. After what happened. After finding out that the others know. He lays in his bed, staring up at the canopy, tapping his fingers

anxiously on his stomach. But eventually he gets up. Of course he does. Taking the map and looking nervously at Sirius's bed before slipping out the door.

He's more cautious this time, constantly checking his surroundings, not for Filch, but for his friends. It's only a matter of time really, Sirius won't be able to let this go forever. Honestly he's kind of impressed Sirius hasn't already tried to follow him. If it'd been the other way around James is pretty sure he'd have done it the second night. He expects he has Moony to thank for Sirius's restraint.

When he finally makes it outside Regulus is waiting for him, sitting facing the door, no telescope, hands clasped between his knees. He doesn't look remorseful, he just looks determined.

His eyes meet James's and for a moment they just stand there, facing one another, and James can't help but feel like they've been here before.

"I don't get his attention often," Regulus says finally, breaking the silence. His words sound tense.

James arches his brow. "And that's what you decided to do with it?"

Regulus lets out a breath, face unreadable. "It's...complicated."

"He was walking away. You could have just—"

"Yeah, but you see, that's what he always does," Regulus says coldly, "walks away."

"Don't," James warns, "really don't Reg, because I'm not going to stand here and listen to you act like he didn't have every right to walk out of that fucking house." James feels himself shake with the weight of his anger.

Regulus's eyes narrow. "Right. Of course. You're on his side."

"I don't know how to be on your side," James is still standing so far away and part of him hates that, because it's been a week—a week of dreaming and wanting and he's tired of fighting. He feels like all he's been doing lately is fighting with the people he cares about. It's exhausting. "I don't even know what your side is."

There are a lot of words in Regulus's stare that he wishes the other boy would say out loud. But in the end, all James gets is; "No," there's a pause as Regulus drops his head, the rest of his body remaining carefully held. Ready to pounce. To run. "No I'm not sure I do either."

"Reg..." when he doesn't speak again James finally makes himself step forward, crouching in front of Regulus, hands on his calves. He waits for the other boy to look up but instead, after several moments of tense silence, Regulus leans forward, resting his forehead against James's.

"We shouldn't have done this," Regulus's voice is quiet. "I'm usually better at not—" he cuts himself off, letting out a heavy exhale, but he doesn't pull away. James can't see his face but he can feel his heat, the weight of him. It's settling.

“Better at what?” James asks, matching his volume.

“Not taking stupid risks.”

“Ah, can’t say I relate.”

Regulus snorts. “No, I’m sure you can’t.”

They stay like that for a while, pressed together, James listening as Regulus takes deep, even breaths, like he’s trying to calm himself down.

“Reg?” James says eventually, his hands running soothingly up and down the back’s of Regulus’s legs.

“Hmm?” is the only response he gets.

“Come home with me.”

Regulus pulls back so fast James nearly falls into his lap.

“What?”

James steadies himself. “Don’t go back there—don’t go back to them.”

James can’t read the expression on Regulus face—shock? Fear? Anger? Maybe all three.

“I can’t—“

“You can,” James insists, feeling desperate. “You can—my mum, she wanted to come get you last summer, after Sirius showed up—“

“I know,” and something in his tone makes James’s breath catch.

“You know?” he repeats, looking at him quizzically. “How?”

“My father might not work at the Ministry anymore but he still has friends. When Dumbledore started asking around it got back to them.”

“And your parents told you?”

Regulus imperfectly suppresses a grimace. “In a manner of speaking.”

James doesn’t like the way that sounds at all, “did they...threaten you?”

He’s met with a blank stare and James starts to feel the return of the shaking anger in his bones.

“They did more than threaten you?” he all but growls.

Regulus sighs. “Leave it James, they just wanted to make sure I wasn’t—that I didn’t know anything about it. That I wasn’t involved. And I wasn’t, so...”

“Reg,” James squeezes his legs, looking up imploringly at the younger boy. “Come home with me.”

But Regulus only shakes his head. “I can’t—I’m not leaving my father.”

James opens his mouth to try again, but Regulus pushes away from him before he can, getting to his feet.

“I told you not to try and save me James.”

“God, you and your brother are so melodramatic,” James stands up now too, levelling Regulus with a look. “You’re not a loss cause Regulus, you’re not.”

That seems to take the younger boy by surprise and James watches him fight with himself, watches him chew up the words as they try to escape his mouth.

“Not everyone can be a hero,” he says eventually.

“There aren’t any heroes, remember? You said that. No heroes, no villains, just people.”

They stare at one another, and James can see his jaw clenching, muscles shifting beneath his skin.

“It’s harder to believe that standing next to you,” Regulus says eventually, causing James to let out a frustrated noise.

“I’m not a hero Reg.”

But the younger boy only smiles, quiet and sad. “See, I think you might be though. Sometimes James, you shine so fucking bright I—I feel like I’m going to burn up.”

Those words sink somewhere deep inside him. And he wants. And wants. And wants.

“My whole life, everything has always been so cold and then you—you—and you started focusing it on me and I could feel it. Feel you watching me, feel you in my head, in my sleep. You take up so much space, you make everything so full. And it’s intoxicating. Just being around you, having all that power focused on me,” Regulus sounds breathless.

“I meant what I said James—on the Quidditch pitch—I don’t want to break you. But I will, if you let me I will. Because I’m not Sirius. There’s something in me and it’s rotten and I—“

James steps forward, closing the space between them but not touching, not yet, just holding his hand out—a question. After a moment of hesitating Regulus nods and James brings his hands to his face, holding it carefully, tilting his chin so that those grey eyes meet his.

“I don’t know who or what made you give up on yourself Regulus, but I need you to stop.”

“James—“

“You are worth saving.”

Regulus makes a strangled noise and James bends down and kisses it out of his mouth. Soft and gentle, not pushing but taking, whatever it is that Regulus is willing to give him. He feels the other boy's hands curl up in his shirt. He doesn't remember backing them up, but suddenly James is pressing Regulus into the castle wall, pulling another noise out of him that vibrates through his chest.

They push together, every inch of them touching, Regulus bleeding into him. Cold hands slip under James's shirt, running up his back, his chest—electric currents rushing through him.

"The sun," he gasps when they break apart, still pressed together, foreheads resting against one another.

"What?"

"That's what I thought," James pushes the words out on his next exhale, pulling back just enough to see Regulus's eyes. "The first time you kissed me, I thought—he touches like the sun," James laughs helplessly. "You think I'm bright Reg? You—you, when you let yourself, shine so fucking bright."

A pained look crosses Regulus's face and James is about to ask why when Reg leans forward again, kissing harder. His teeth bite at James's lower lip before pushing deeper, taking his mouth. This kiss is all encompassing. He feels Reg, and tastes him, and smells him. He wants. And wants. And wants.

Hands start to play with the waistband of his pants.

"Reg," he hums into his mouth, which is not at all articulating the things he's trying to say but it's hard to concentrate. Regulus's mouth finds its way along his jaw, down his neck, and the fire that sparks in the pit of James's stomach is almost unbearable. His hands fall against the wall on either side of Regulus's head, bracketing him in, keeping James standing as Regulus's hands keep moving.

Part of James's brain—the loud part—screams

Yes.

Yes this.

Please.

More.

But the other part, the quieter part, says

Careful.

Be careful.

Be careful with him.

Which seems ridiculous since Regulus is a hundred percent the one in control and yet...

“Maybe we should—“ his voice cuts out as Regulus presses his hand against him and all James sees is white, dropping his head into the crook of Regulus’s neck.

“Fuck,” he hisses, Reg starting a slow rhythm that James is almost positive is going to take him apart stitch by stitch.

“That’s the idea.”

But something isn’t quite right—his voice too tight.

Regulus presses down with his thumb and James can’t keep back the groan that tears out of his throat.

“Reg—we can’t do this,” his voice sounds wrecked—husky and breathless.

“We can,” is all he says.

And somehow they’re kissing again, his mouth hot and sweet. James has kissed other people but never like this. Never so desperately. He pulls one of his hands off the wall, bringing it to the back of Regulus’s neck.

And that’s when he feels it.

“Reg—Regulus—hey,” he pulls back slightly, trying to get a better look at Regulus’s face.

They’re both breathing heavily, the tops of Regulus’s cheeks flushed in a way that James has never seen and doesn’t think he will ever forget.

“Regulus you’re shaking.”

He can see the other boy swallow. “It happens.”

“It happens?”

“It’ll stop eventually.”

And James has no idea what any of that means, but Regulus is clearly not interested in letting him figure it out because his hand starts moving again, grip tightening in a way that makes James choke.

“Fuck—fuck you’re so—“ he doesn’t know how to finish that sentence, trying desperately to keep himself together. “Regulus you can’t just do this because you don’t want to talk.”

“You’re the one who kissed me, remember?”

His hand stills, thumb making maddening circles that send shocks through James’s whole body. He wants to scream. And other things. God, so many other things.

“I have terrible impulse control,” he exhales. “But I don’t think you want this.” He can feel it, feel it the way he always does—the tension under Regulus’s skin. Like fear but not quite.

Regulus presses his thumb down one more time, making James whimper before he starts moving his hand again, faster now.

James’s eyes close, every fibre of his being begging him to lean into it, to sink into Regulus’s body. But instead he puts his hands on Regulus’s shoulders and pushes back.

He can hear his own ragged breath in his ears, Regulus looking up at him surprised.

“I’m not doing this—this way,” James says eventually, sounding as though he’s just run a marathon.

Regulus’s expression goes from surprised to annoyed in no time. “What way?”

“We’re fighting.”

“Are we?”

James groans, still struggling to think straight while looking at Regulus’s mouth—red and wet and so fucking close.

“We’re something.”

“Oh, well, in that case,” Regulus says sharply, pulling himself out from under James’s hands and walking away. James feels his bones ache at the loss.

“You know what I mean.”

“I assure you I don’t,” he gives James a once over. “And put your dick away Potter, if you expect me to take you seriously.”

James rolls his eyes, doing up his pants up with fumbling hands. “We haven’t...fixed anything,” he says, looking back up. “And you were shaking.”

Regulus scoffs. “People shake during sex, I’m not sure how limited—“

“Don’t be an ass Reg,” James cuts him off. “I know the difference.”

Regulus just stands there, the defiant look back on his face, hands in fists at his sides.

“I didn’t say no.”

“You didn’t say yes.”

“Oh fuck you and your honourable bullshit,” Regulus throws his hands up but he isn’t able to hide himself, not completely. Isn’t able to keep his voice from cracking. “So what—what does it matter?”

“It matters Reg,” James says, he wants to go to him but he doesn’t, holding himself back, watching as Regulus tries desperately to close himself off. He looks at James like he wants him to understand and James wishes that he did, that whatever it is that Regulus is desperate not to have to explain he didn’t have to.

“This is what we get,” Regulus says finally. “There’s no—there’s no other way James. It’s always going to be like this. And I want you—I want you and I can have you like this. You’re mine here, not his, and I want you.”

James tries to pick that apart, only understanding half of it. “There’s more?” he says finally. “You want me but you don’t? Because you didn’t—“

Regulus cuts him off with a sigh. “It’s—it’s complicated, I can’t—“

“You don’t have to explain.”

Regulus laughs, passing a hand over his face. “I really should, but it’s nice that you don’t think so.”

“Reg,” James says softly. “First night I was up here, do you remember what I said?”

“I remember all of it,” the words seem to come out of him without his permission, a surprisingly sweet confession and James tries not to get distracted by it.

“I told you that I didn’t want to take anything from you,” he looks right into Regulus’s eyes. “I meant that Reg. I mean that.”

“You—how are you like this?” Regulus asks exasperated.

James lets himself smile a little. “No one’s fucked me up yet, or at least that’s what I’ve been told.”

Regulus lets out a huff that’s almost a laugh, staring at James for a long time before looking away. “What if I want to take from you?” he asks finally.

James steps closer, slowly, closing the space between them. “Okay,” he says.

“It’s not.”

James shrugs. “Maybe, but, you know, I have a lot to give. More than most people I think. You can take it if you want. I’ll let you have whatever you want Reg.”

Regulus shakes his head, turning away from James and walking over to the railing, looking out over the night. James wants to follow, desperately, but he doesn’t.

“Most people don’t notice,” Regulus says eventually.

“Don’t notice?”

He can't see Regulus's face, so for the next few moments of silence he really has no idea what's happening.

"I always kind of—shut down a bit. Defence mechanism I think," he laughs and the sound is heavy. "Not that there's been that many people mind you but, none of them seemed to—or I guess they didn't care." There's no inflection in his voice. He says all this like it's nothing to him. Like he's describing the weather.

James's chest feels tight. He wants to set the world on fire. Wants to take Regulus somewhere far away where nothing can touch him. He wan't to fix this. He knows he can't.

"I'm not them," is what he manages to say.

There's another long pause before Regulus sighs, dropping his head. "I know," and then, "but sometimes I wish you were. Easier that way. This..." he lets his voice trail off, staring at his hands. "I thought I could control it, I thought I could keep it here, just us. But I can't."

James understands that. Oh how he understands that. It's easier when it's just the two of them, without their friends and families, without politics. He watches Regulus's back and feels overwhelmed with all the things he feels for him.

Eventually, Regulus turns around. He looks resigned. "I'm not a very good person," James opens his mouth to interrupt but Regulus talks over him. "I'm not going to do the right thing here."

"The right thing?" James manages to ask.

Regulus looks at him sadly. "I'm not going to let you go James, not until you make me. Not until you tell me you don't want me. I should, I never should have let this start. I should have told you to fuck off and been done with it. But, well," he shrugs a little helplessly. "I'm not a very good person."

Somehow those words hurt and feel good all at the same time, tangling up inside of James like the rest of it.

"I want you," he says a breathlessly. "I want you Reg."

The other boy's eyes close briefly before he steps forward, slow, careful, and James lets him. Lets him bring them together again, lets him hold his face, thumb brushing his lips, lets him pull lightly on the back of his head, bringing their mouths together. It's not like it was before, it's careful, breakable. And James thinks, this is what they mean, when they say love is falling.

Because he doesn't know where the floor is.

Because he knows it's going to hurt when they hit the ground.

Hello lovelies!

This chapter was really hard to write for some reason so hopefully it turned out okay - I really struggled to get that ending right.

Honestly, I say it every time, but getting to read the comments on this story has been really nice so THANK YOU.

Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Surprise it's Christmas (almost)!

Chapter Notes

I just wanted to real quick address something I know has been talked about in the fandom recently (and also is just important):

The characters in this story are minors, now, I still have some sexual content because a) teenagers do have sex and b) I want them to have conversations about consent and boundaries and (eventually) trauma because it's relevant (I think) to the characters BUT I try to do it in a way that isn't too explicit or graphic because, again, minors.

Hopefully I manage not to cross any boundaries but if any of you feel like I do, give me a shout, I'm always happy to make changes if something makes someone feel uncomfortable

Okay, I'm done now, thank you for coming to my TedTalk!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“It just doesn’t make any sense!”

There’s a collective groan from the room.

“It makes perfect sense,” James says indignantly, cheeks flushed from the firewhiskey.

“Lily, it’s a lost cause,” Remus sends her sympathetic look. “Believe me, I’ve tried. It’s like a cult.”

“All sports are cults, but at least muggle ones don’t have a ball worth a hundred-and-fifty points that automatically ends the game,” she tilts the drink she’s holding back into her mouth, fiery red hair piled in a messy bun on top of her head.

“Or have a ball that’s trying to kill you,” Remus adds.

She gestures to him emphatically with her bottle. “Exactly!”

It's the night before Christmas Holidays and nearly all of the Gryffindor upper years are sitting around the common room drinking.

"Remus," James says solemnly. "I hope you know that you're breaking my heart."

The other boy rolls his eyes. "Oh, I'm sure you'll get over it."

"Come on James," Lily pushes, "you must see how mad it is—you nearly got beheaded in your last game."

"That," Frank cuts in emphatically, "was Bones's fault, not quidditch's. It was a bad play."

"Here, here," Mary lifts her drink in the air and Marlene giggles.

"I mean, it was kind of quidditch's fault."

"Due to the aforementioned murder balls," Remus backs Lily up.

"Exactly," she says again, laughing a bit. "How do they not see it?"

"Cult, this is what I'm saying."

"Oh just get a room you two," James says exasperated. "A no fun boring room."

"A safe reasonable room," Lily corrects.

Sirius makes a gagging noise. "Ugh, reasonable, talk about a boner killer."

"I don't think anyone was talking about boners darling," Alice sing-songs from her spot next to Frank.

"Weren't they?" Sirius asks. "Shame that."

That gets a laugh from everyone but Remus, who looks very determinedly at the fireplace. It's been weeks but James still catches them avoiding eye contact, or not standing too close. He hates it, but seeing as his last conversation with Sirius ended in more fighting he's not exactly sure what to do about it.

"Speaking of quidditch cults," Alice says, sending Frank a mischievous smile that has him blushing. They're sitting on the sofa with Mary, Lily and Marlene leaning against their legs, the marauders sprawled out on the floor in front of them.

"This one's just got his first pro offer," she punches his arm affectionately.

"Hey, no way!" James sits up, surprised to only be hearing about this now. "That's brilliant!"

"Who's trying to snap you up Franky-boy?" Sirius asks.

"Puddlemere, believe it or not," Frank gives them a shy smile, rubbing the back of his neck. Off the pitch Frank is actually rather reserved, it always throws James for a loop. Especially since Alice is about the most extraverted person he knows, besides Sirius, of course.

“No shit,” Sirius says grinning. “That’s mad.”

“You’re going get us season tickets right?” James leans over to smack Frank’s legs.

The older boy rolls his eyes. “As if you need me to Potter. Doesn’t your family have a private box at the stadium outside of London?”

Sirius snorts. “Yeah they do, and let me tell you, the only thing better than watching quidditch, is watching quidditch while drinking champagne and eating caviar.”

James glares at him. “We don’t eat caviar at quidditch matches.”

“I’m sorry, do you eat caviar at other times?” Lily asks, a little bemused.

“Come now Evans,” Sirius pulls back his shoulders and tilts up his nose, speaking in his haughtiest voice. “What do you expect us to eat? Fish sticks? Crisps? Our aristocratic constitutions simply would not stand for it. No, give me caviar or give me death!”

Lily snorts as James attempts to kick Sirius across the floor.

“Give me caviar or give me death,” Marlene laughs. “I need that on a t-shirt.” Which makes Sirius look far too pleased with himself.

“Do you think you’ll accept it then, the offer?” James turns back to Frank, hoping to change the subject. He’s never felt particularly comfortable with his family’s wealth.

The older boy grimaces. “Actually, I’ve been thinking lately that I might not play pro at all.”

There’s a beat of silence.

“What?” James manages eventually.

“Is it the murder balls?” Remus asks in a fake whisper.

Franks smiles but it’s a little half hearted. “No, it’s—with everything that’s going on, I just think that I might be better off in the Auror department, making a difference. If they’ll have me, that is.”

“Oh they’ll have you,” Alice squeezes his arm. “You and me both.”

“You want to be an Auror?” Peter asks, sounding a little shocked.

If she’s offended by the looks of surprise she doesn’t show it, flashing Peter a toothy grin. “Well, someone’s gotta protect you lot from the baddies, don’t they?”

An awkward silence drifts over the group, suddenly confronted with the world outside of Hogwarts. It’s not that they don’t know what’s going on, because they do, as much as they can, anyway. James sees the tense way his parents hold their smiles these days, the way they whisper behind their hands and close their doors. But it always feels distant somehow,

something that is happening somewhere else to people he doesn't know. Frank and Alice though—Frank and Alice are right here.

Snape's voice manages to weasel its way unwelcome into James's thoughts;

This is all irrelevant Potter, all so insignificant compared to what's coming. And it's not going to be long now, I can wait. I can be so patient.

"I have an idea," Mary says suddenly, causing them all to start. She sits forward on the sofa, absentmindedly running her fingers through Marlene's hair.

"Why does that sound like a threat when you say it?" Lily asks, unable to keep the amusement out of her voice.

"Couldn't tell you dear, now, what do you lot say to a round of spin the bottle?"

Both Marlene and Lily groan.

"Oooh, yes," Alice claps her hands, "I am very into that!"

"I like the way your brain works Macdonald," Sirius seconds, earning him a wink from Mary that has James wondering, not for the first time, how it is that they didn't make it work. The two of them are so bloody similar.

"Oh because that doesn't sound awkward at all," Remus says flatly.

James lifts his glass to him. "I agree with Moony."

"Why don't you just go join him and Evans in their reasonable-boner-killing-no-fun-room then," it's Sirius's turn to kick James, nearly spilling his drink.

"Oi, watch it you heathen!"

Mary reaches over and ruffles Peter's hair. "What about you Pete? What do you say?" she gives him a smile that James thinks is thoroughly unfair.

Peter's cheeks go red. "Oh—uh—yeah, yeah sure. Why not, could be—uh—fun."

James rolls his eyes. "Merlin Peter."

Mary sits back looking quite pleased with herself. "Excellent," she claps her hands together. "That's the majority then, so we're playing."

"First of all, no it isn't," Remus says. "And second of all, I don't remember agreeing to be part of a democracy."

Mary turns her big brown eyes on him, batting her lashes in a way that makes even James's stomach swoop, but Remus only gives her a flat look.

"Yeah, not gonna work on me Macdonald."

Marlene snorts.

“Remus, I love you, I ever tell you that?” James says, smiling.

“Almost constantly James, it’s getting a bit much if I’m being honest.”

“Just waiting for the day you say it back babe.”

Sirius reaches his arm impatiently towards the sofa. “Macdonald, bottle?” sounding suddenly irritated for some reason. James sends him a questioning look but Sirius very determinedly ignores him.

Mary reaches over to the coffee table beside her, grabbing one of her empties and passing it down to Sirius who places it firmly in the middle of the carpet.

“Your game Macdonald, you start.”

“Don’t mind if I do,” she leans over Marlene, giving the bottle a practiced twist.

James feels warm as he looks out at his friends, all gathered in the holly covered common room, muggle Christmas lights, that Mary insisted on hanging-up, draped over the fireplace, casting everything in a rainbow glow.

“Oh boy,” Sirius gives Peter a slap on the back as the bottle slows right in front of him. Peter’s eyes grow to about twice their normal size, staring at the bottle like he’s never seen one before.

“I think he’s going to combust,” Lily murmurs beside James, who can’t help but snort.

“Yeah, in his pants.”

“Merlin, James,” she reaches over and punches his arm even though they’re both laughing.

“Alright Petey,” Mary is clearly enjoying the effect that she’s having on Peter. “C’mere,”

“Oh no,” Marlene crawls out from between Mary’s legs and moves towards Lily. “You are not kissing overtop of me.”

Mary rolls her eyes. “Prude.”

“Peter?” Remus leans forward, waving his hand in front of Peter’s face, which appears to be frozen, along with the rest of him. “I think we might have broken him.”

Mary sighs, blowing a strand of curly brown hair out of her face. “Oh honestly,” she pushes off of the sofa, taking Peter’s face very purposefully between her hands and bringing them together with an almost comical “smack.”

“Godric’s sake Mary don’t hurt the boy,” Alice laughs, burying her face in Franks’s shoulder.

After several seconds the two Gryffindors part, Peter’s eyes somehow even wider.

“Adequate,” Mary judges, before smiling and kissing the top of his head.

“Thanks,” he says, slightly dazed, and James doesn’t have the heart to tell him that “adequate” is not exactly a compliment.

“Aw, look out our wittle Pwete, he’s a man now,” Sirius pinches his cheeks, and it’s a testament to how blissed out Peter is that he doesn’t even try to swat him away.

“Okay Mckinnon,” Mary slides back into her spot on the sofa, “your turn.”

“I can’t help but feel I’ll be a disappointment after that,” Marlene says dryly, reaching for the bottle. It skids in a pathetic circle on the carpet, stopping rather inexactly between James and the empty armchair.

“Is it a wash?” Lily asks, looking around.

“Nuh-uh,” Mary grins. “That’s you Potter.”

In all honesty, if it had to be anyone, he’s rather pleased it’s Marlene. James places his drink down and raises an eyebrow at her, as if to say; “shall we?”

With a laugh she crawls across the circle to meet James halfway, her eyes bright and blue in the dim light of the room.

It’s a quick kiss, mouthes closed, lips both sticky from the alcohol. But it’s nice. Her hand holds his shoulder, his cups her face. It feels familiar. When they break apart she smiles at him.

“Adequate.”

James can’t stop himself from laughing, “Please McKinnon, I rocked your world.”

She sticks out her tongue at him.

He doesn’t miss the very pointed looks that Sirius sends him, the “see, what did I tell you?” looks. He does ignore them though.

“Remus, your up,” Marlene passes the bottle to him as she leans back against the sofa, Mary’s hand in her hair again.

“I don’t remember agreeing to this,” he takes the bottle with great trepidation.

“Lupin,” Mary sends him a pointed stare, “don’t make me fight you, because I will.”

Remus makes an exaggerated show of placing the bottle back in the middle of the floor. “I want it known that I’m only doing this because I one-hundred-percent believe you.”

Mary smiles. “Noted.”

With the air of the long suffering, Remus spins the bottle.

It hadn't quite occurred to James just how awkward this game could get. He had been against it, of course, very aware of the red-head sitting next to him and the history he didn't want to bring up with a kiss. Or of Sirius's maybe-not-so-fake crush on Alice who was currently sitting with her boyfriend, who was also their captain, and who might not appreciate the two of them snogging in front of him. But he hadn't considered what would happen if, say, Remus, spun the bottle and it landed on—

"Sirius," Mary lets out a half-laugh half-gasp as the bottle comes to a stop.

The ensuing silence is deafening.

Remus looks as though he wants the ground to swallow him whole, face suddenly pale as he stares very determinedly at his hands, Sirius gone rigid on the other side of Peter.

"Re-spin?" Frank suggests, which elicits outraged noises from both Alice and Mary.

"That is not how the game works Frankfurt," Mary says resolutely.

"Yeah, that's not my na—"

"You can't just re-spin because you didn't get the person you wanted."

"Honestly, no need to be weird about it," Alice adds, "James would kiss Remus in a heartbeat, wouldn't you Jamie?"

James does his best not to choke, wishing very much to be left out of it. "Uh—yeah," he manages eventually, not looking at anyone. "Sure, 'course I would." He hopes they can't hear the strain in his voice.

"I mean, it is a bit..." Pete starts, causing James's heart to clench.

"Bit what?" Marlene's voice is sharp as she turns to him.

"I just meant...you know..."

"We don't actually," Lily chimes in, causing James to look over at her, surprised and oddly relieved all at once. "What do you mean Peter?"

Peter's eyes widen as he realizes the hole he's dug himself into. "No—no—I just, I'm just saying that it would be weird to...you know...kiss a mate. That's all."

"You kissed me," Mary says calmly. "Didn't seem like you found it that weird."

"No—I mean—yes, but that—that's different."

"Different how?" Alice asks, leaning across Frank's lap as she does so.

Peter is sweating now, eyes darting to James for help but finding none.

"No—never mind—forget I said anything."

“Well okay then,” Mary looks back to Sirius and Remus who have not moved or spoken since the bottle stopped spinning. “Lets go boys.”

There are a few more moments of stillness before Remus reaches jerkily for the bottle, hand shaking as he passes it off to Lily, who takes it with a startled expression on her face.

“I’m not playing,” Remus says, still not looking at anyone.

Mary opens her mouth to object but James quickly cuts her off. “Okay Evans,” he says loudly, overly so, in the new silence that’s fallen around the group, “lets see what you’ve got.”

Lily, thankfully, seems to catch on quick. Smiling and spinning the bottle without question, effectively silencing Mary when it lands on Frank, earning a “woop-woop” from Alice and generally dissolving the tension.

James can’t quite get rid of the aching in his chest though, even while watching the spectacle that is Evans and Longbottom’s kiss. He had thought—he had at least thought that Remus... but if this is how they react just to the idea of kissing...James tries to cover up his grimace by taking a swig of his drink.

He meets Marlene’s gaze only once, and finds exactly what he’s expecting.

Pity.

The game never quite recovers its momentum and after a few more spins the group breaks up, all yawns and sleepy goodnights and promises to say goodbye tomorrow before the train.

When James heads upstairs Remus and Sirius are the only ones left in the common room. He debates whether or not he should stay, but decides against it. Maybe it’ll help—the two of them being alone together—talking.

Exhausted, he drags himself to their room, saying goodnight to Peter before drawing the curtains around his bed and waiting, all the while trying not to think about the sick look that had crossed Sirius’s face. Or Remus’s for that matter. About how it would feel to have them look at him that way.

Some weak part of him tries to find comfort in the fact that they don’t have to know. But it doesn’t work. Because in the end he’ll still know, and besides, he doesn’t want it to be like this forever. To love always in the dark.

After a while he starts to hear Peter snore and pulls out the map. Regulus’s name hovers in the astronomy tower, the sight making James smile even while his chest aches. His eyes travel next to his two friends, still in the common room. He sighs, setting the map down and managing to stay still for a whole ten minutes longer before he can’t stand it anymore.

He grabs the invisibility cloak, slipping the map into the waistband of his pants and carefully opening the door so as to not wake Peter.

He's about halfway down the stairs when he hears Remus and Sirius, not the words exactly, but the humming of their whispered voices. He slows his pace, making sure to be quiet. He's not exactly certain how he's planning to get through the portrait without them noticing, but he's hoping an opportunity will present itself.

"I miss you."

James falters on the last step, the break in Sirius's voice making him freeze. They're still sitting in the same spots they were when he left, a good deal of distance between them. James can see Sirius's face but Remus has his back to him.

"God, don't," Remus leans forward, dropping his head into his hands.

"It's just the truth Remus," when the silence stretches on he sighs, eyes like bleeding wounds, and James is struck by the pain that seems to sit in the room. He'd known they were fighting but he hadn't thought—

"I don't know how to handle this."

Remus laughs wetly. "Me, you mean?"

Sirius makes a pained noise. "No—no I mean—Merlin, I don't—I can't—" his hand runs angrily through his hair. "I can't Remus," his words are shaky.

"Right. Fine. You've said. I understand."

"I doubt that."

James swears that Remus actually growls. "Don't say that unless you're going to explain yourself."

"Sorry, okay, sorry," Sirius grimaces but doesn't offer any further explanation, his words followed by more silence.

James wonders how much talking they've actually done since he went upstairs. It doesn't feel like much.

"I'm tired," Remus exhales finally. "I'm going to bed."

James quickly moves off the stairs and out of the way as he watches Remus get to his feet.

"Wait—Moons, please just—" Sirius's voice is wrecked and Remus must hear it too because he turns back, watching Sirius fight with himself.

"You—you have to understand," Sirius breathes with difficulty. "You, James, Peter, you're the only things that matter to me, in the whole world."

Remus nods stiffly. "I get it Pads, we're just friends. I do understand."

“No, that’s,” Sirius gets to his feet too now, closing the distance between them but not touching. “You are important to me,” he says desperately, looking right into Remus’s eyes. “You are so important and I’m scared I’m going to lose you—scared I’m already losing you and I can’t handle that Remus, I can’t. It’ll break me. I just don’t know what to do here—what to do with—with whatever it is that’s happened—“

“You kissed me, that’s what happened.”

James steps back, running right into the wall behind him and biting down on his lip so hard he draws blood just to keep himself quiet.

Holy shit.

Holy shit.

Holy.

Shit.

Sirius looks like he’s just been slapped, eyes going to the stairwell. At first James is worried he’s made some sort of noise but then Remus scoffs.

“No one can hear me Sirius, they’re all asleep, Merlin.”

Sirius keeps staring though, as though expecting someone to come after him. His mum, James realizes, recognizing that look, the fear that only Walburga can bring out in him.

“Remus, please,” Sirius is whispering now, and James isn’t sure what it is he’s begging for.

Remus sounds defeated. “You told me not to say anything and I won’t.”

“But I didn’t want—“ Sirius swallows with some difficulty. “You won’t even look at me.”

James is well aware that he shouldn’t be here. Shouldn’t be hearing any of this. But he can’t very well walk out of the portrait hole now and he’s pretty sure that if Sirius hears the door upstairs he’ll freak. Also, if he’s being honest with himself, he wants to hear this.

“Sirius,” Remus says finally, the name soft in his mouth. “I just—it’s hard, that’s all.”

“I know.”

Remus reaches out but drops his hand before it gets to him, sighing as he pinches the bridge of his nose. “I just don’t know what you want from me. You were so scared and then it was like, every time I came near you, I could feel that fear and I—I hate the idea that I make you feel like that. So I just thought...it’d be easier for you—for both of us—to...stay away. For a bit.”

Sirius shakes his head, eyes big, looking so young it startles James. “I need you Moony,” he begs. “I always need you. I know this is—my fault—that I messed it all up—”

Remus cuts him off. “That’s not what this is about.”

And James wonders if Sirius understands what that means because he surely doesn’t. There’s a moment of tense stillness before Sirius finally manages to speak.

“Then what’s it about Moony?”

Remus shakes his head turning away from Sirius and therefor towards James, which is strange. Strange to have him staring nearly straight at him with that heartbroken look on his face.

“Why did you kiss me Sirius?”

The other boy looks lost. “I don’t know.”

Lie, James thinks, but he can’t tell if Remus spots it as easily.

Remus nods, resigned. “That’s what this is about.”

Several minutes pass in which Sirius opens and closes his mouth but no sound makes it out. Eventually, Remus looks back at him, putting him out of his misery.

“When you figure it out let me know, yeah? Until then...you haven’t lost me, I just can’t—I can’t be there all the time. It’s too hard.”

Sirius’s voice is something broken. “I never wanted to make life harder for you.”

Remus bites down on his lower lip, trying and failing to keep back the wounded noise that rips out of him. Sirius steps forward but Remus waves him off.

“I’m going to bed,” he says, choked, not waiting for a reply before he blows past James and up the stairs.

James watches Sirius sit alone on the sofa, head in his hands, for a long time.

“I was beginning to give up on you,” Regulus says when James bursts through the door to the astronomy tower. He’s over by the railing, looking out at the view. The grounds are beautiful right now, blanketed in a snow that sparkles under the moonlight. Regulus’s warming charm is barely able to keep the cold out.

“Sorry,” James says breathlessly, “thanks for waiting I—“ he steps closer, holding his hands out, desperate to touch him. “Can I?”

Regulus looks at him curiously. James knows how he sounds—heartbroken. It’s how he feels.

“Yes.”

He pulls him in immediately, pressing Regulus's body against his own. Regulus lets him—lets him open his mouth, lets him inside; warm and desperate.

Eventually they part, breathing heavy, Regulus's hands coming up to circle his wrists. "What is it?" he asks, searching James's face. "What's happened?"

James shakes his head, brushing their foreheads against one another. "I'm sorry for how I was, the first time you kissed me."

Regulus's eyes widen. "What?" and then; "James, I was drunk and I pounced on you," James snorts but Regulus ignores him. "I'm not sure I could have expected anything else—I certainly could have expected worse."

And James hates that. The image of Remus's face—Sirius's—invading his thoughts.

"I'm still sorry, I know that must have felt—" but he doesn't have the words to finish that thought, so instead he leans forward and kisses him again, slow and sweet.

They stay there, pressed together like that, in comfortable silence, until eventually Regulus's hand comes up and tugs on his collar. "Come," he says. "I have something to show you."

James arches his brow as Regulus pulls away, moving towards the door. "You have something to show me?" he repeats.

Regulus nods, mistaking James's stillness for worry. "I doubt anyone will be around at this hour, Filch is usually asleep in his office by now and the Prefects will be long done their rounds."

"Wow, very knowledgeable about sneaking about after dark aren't you?" James muses as he follows him into the stairwell, his eyes darting momentarily to the spot outside the door where he stashed the invisibility cloak. He'll just have to come back for it latter.

"Like I've said before, you and my brother are not the only ones who break the rules."

James snorts. "You'll have to excuse me if your ironed pants and perfectly coiffed hair don't scream rebel," he lowers his voice as they slip into the corridor, Regulus lighting his wand but keeping it low.

"I'm sorry, I must have misplaced my leather jacket and Doc Martens," Regulus quips back and it's work for James to hold his laughter in.

He has a vague idea of where they are in the castle—somewhere on the seventh floor—but after a few turns it's easy to get lost and he feels his hands itching to pull out the map.

"Reg, where are you taking me?"

"Shh," he hushes, "you'll see."

James can't help but smile, feeling some of the weight in his chest lighten.

They walk for another ten minutes or so before Regulus stops in front of an empty wall.

“Well, this is fascinating,” James says dryly, earning him an elbow to the side.

“Just wait,” Regulus steps forward and starts pacing back and forth in front of the wall, muttering to himself. Which, James has to admit, is mildly concerning. He’s about to step in when suddenly the wall trembles, lines distorting as a door pulls itself out of the stone.

“Holy shit,” James gasps.

Regulus, who has stopped his pacing, shoots him a grin over his shoulder. “Shall we?”

James’s mouth is fully open, like some kind of cartoon character, looking from Regulus to the door and back again. “Reg, did you just magic a room into existence?”

His grin widens. “Might’ve,” he pushes through the door, James stumbling after him.

The room inside is warm—actually, it reminds James a lot of the Gryffindor common room—there’s an ornate fireplace, dark oak walls covered in tapestries, comfortable looking chairs and sofas everywhere. The one noticeable difference, would be the bed.

James walks into the centre looking around, the ceiling, he notices, has been painted. He’s seen murals like this in older wizarding homes, but never at Hogwarts. There are people he doesn’t recognize who don’t move or appear to be wearing robes, and, in the centre, a man holding a pale body.

“What is this place?” James drops his gaze back down to Regulus who has put his wand away and is currently leaning against the wall looking smug.

“The house elves call it the Come and Go Room, it appears when someone needs it.”

“That—“ James struggles to get his thoughts in order. “That’s bloody brilliant!” He turns about himself again, taking it all in.

“I figured it was getting a little cold for the tower, besides, as long as we’re in here, no one else can find us unless we want them to.”

Those words drift through James’s head as he walks forward, running his hand along the soft upholstery on the sofa. No one can find them. “The map,” he breathes, “it’s not on the map.” They hadn’t known about it, so it’s not plotted, which means that, as long as they’re here, the marauders won’t be able to see them.

“Map?” he hears Regulus ask behind him.

Oh.

Right.

James turns around to find Regulus looking at him curiously. He knows he could lie, it wouldn’t be that hard. But he doesn’t want to.

“I have something to show you too,” he says finally, pulling out the parchment from his waistband. Regulus raises his brow, stepping forward. He hands it over to Reg, who, if anything, looks even more confused.

“James, this is just—“

“Wait,” he pulls out his wand and taps the centre. “I solemnly swear that I am up to no good.”

He always feels a little jolt of pleasure when the map springs to life, their finely penned names coming into focus before the panels fold out, revealing the castle. Honestly, it might be the most impressive thing they’ve ever done.

For a moment Regulus says nothing, staring down at the map in awe. “Is this—is this showing the entire school?”

“Yes.”

“And everyone in it?”

James grins. “Yes.”

Regulus shakes his head. “Merlin that’s—that’s incredible.”

James preens, feeling thoroughly pleased with himself.

“You made this?” he looks back up at James who shrugs.

“Moo—Remus did most of the heavy lifting, me and Sirius were mostly moral support.”

Regulus squints at him before turning back to the map. “You’re being modest,” he says eventually. “Your magic is all over this.”

That surprises James. “You can feel my magic?”

“I—“ but Regulus stops himself, seeming to realize what he’s just admitted to.

All magic has a signature, the touch of the individual core it comes from. But it’s a hard thing to pick up on, usually only your family—people who you’ve spent years with—are ever really able to do it. James can recognize his mum usually, but that’s about it. It’s a hard thing to explain—like touch and taste and smell all rolled into one.

“What’s it like?” James asks quietly, leaning into Regulus a little more.

“What’s what like?” the other boy keeps his eyes very determinedly on the map in his hands.

“My magic. What does it...feel like...to you?”

Regulus is holding himself still, his face hidden by his dark curls. James can feel the tension in him, knows the younger boy is trying to decide whether to give in or push back. It’s a process with Regulus. The walls don’t come down all at once but brick by brick.

“Spring,” he says finally. “It’s—you feel like spring.”

James is gentle when he takes hold of Regulus’s face, tilting it over his shoulder so that he can kiss him. At first it’s innocent, shallow, but then the map is gone and Regulus’s hands are in his hair, sliding down his arms.

“Fuck,” he exhales, foreheads pressed together. “I don’t know how I’m going to survive two weeks without this.”

He’s been trying not to think about it—Christmas break—trying not to think about where Regulus will be.

“You’ll be okay?” he asks, pulling back, hands coming to hold Regulus’s face.

“James, I’ve spent the last fourteen years of my life in that house, another holiday isn’t going to make much difference.”

But James can see the tension in the way he holds his mouth, the way his eyes cloud over.

“I know you said not to write—“

“No.”

James nods. “But if you need to, you can come to me, okay?” he tries to make those words as solid as he can, tries to give them to Regulus, something to hold on to. “Letter, floo, show up on my doorstep, I don’t care.”

Regulus scoffs, pulling out of his grip but not going too far. “I’m sure that would go over well with my brother.”

“He’ll get over it,” James says dismissively, as though it isn’t something he’s spent the past few months agonizing over. Regulus doesn’t need to know that though, he just needs to know that he has somewhere to go. “You understand? I don’t care about secrets or what people think, if you need to, you come find me, okay? Or even if you just want to.”

Regulus looks back at him, grey eyes searching, though for what James doesn’t know. Regardless, he tries to lay himself open, tries to let himself be known. He told Regulus he could take what he wanted and he meant it.

I won’t hurt you, he wants to say, I promise.

Finally, Regulus steps close again, bringing their mouths together, the kiss is slow, his teeth pulling on James’s lower lip before he starts nudging him backwards. It takes James a moment to realize where they’re going.

“Regulus,” he exhales against his lips.

“The bed is here for a reason Potter,” the backs of James’s legs collide with the mattress.

“Doesn’t mean we have to do anything,” James already feels breathless.

“You’ve made that abundantly clear,” Regulus straddles James’s hips, hand on his chest, pushing him down. He pauses then, hovering above him, sending shivers through James’s whole body.

“I’m saying yes James,” his fingers play with the collar of James’s shirt and James feels his breath hitch. “But there are—I have—rules.”

“Okay,” James sounds overeager even to his own ears, but he can’t help it. Regulus is on top of him. In bed. His brain can barely cope, “whatever you want.”

“Don’t—“ he struggles to swallow, “don’t touch me.”

James’s hands instantly drop away from where they’d been gripping Regulus’s waist.

The younger boy rolls his eyes. “Not like that, I mean—“

It takes James far too long. “Oh,” he says, and then; “Okay, of course.”

“Yes?”

James nods. “Yes Regulus, yes.”

And then they’re kissing again.

Regulus is everywhere—his hands, his mouth, his voice. He slides James’s t-shirt off with ease, trailing open mouthed kisses down his neck, his shoulders, his chest. James hears a high whining noise and realizes too late that it’s coming from his own mouth.

“I like you like this,” Regulus says against his skin, “under my hands.” His voice is low and rough and it does things to James that he wasn’t expecting.

“Whatever you want Reg,” he repeats, his brain unable to explain itself more than that. Because he likes it too, maybe more than he should. He likes being touched, being held, being cared for. When Regulus’s fingers skate across his skin he feels real. They feel real. The two of them, here together. They feel like something James can keep.

Regulus bites lightly into the skin above James’s hip before flicking his trousers open and shimmying them off of him. James blinks up at the younger boy, who pauses now, just watching. He brings his hand to hold Regulus’s face and Regulus leans into the touch, turning to kiss the inside of James’s palm. An affection so strong he thinks it might pull the heart from his chest runs through James.

“Okay?” he asks, voice barely there.

Regulus nods. “Yeah James, yeah, it’s good. You’re so—you’re so good.”

He takes James’s mouth before he can answer and James isn’t sure if it’s the words or the kiss that make him moan. Probably both.

Regulus takes him apart. It's slower and softer than James expects—not that he has much experience to go on. He keeps his own touches confined to Regulus's upper body, keeps them over his clothes, never pushing. Never wanting to. Regulus has him in his hand and then he takes him in his mouth and James just about dies.

“Reg,” the name barely makes it out of him, a sound more than anything else. “Fuck—fuck, Reg I'm going to—“ his voice breaks but Regulus doesn't move.

Everything blurs together after that—touch and sound and sight. His chest hitching as he tries to breathe through it.

“Merlin,” he whispers, blinking his eyes open, his body full of pins and needles as Regulus sits up, wiping his mouth on the back of his hand.

“C'mere,” James manages, reaching for him. Regulus pauses before allowing himself to be pulled into James's arms. They lie facing each other, James kissing him, unwilling to lose the weight of him. The heat.

Eventually Regulus makes a noise of protest, pulling back slightly. “I need a minute,” he gasps, and James instantly lets go, watching Regulus roll onto his back, chest heaving, trousers tented.

“You're sure you don't want—“

Regulus shakes his head, a sharp motion, and James lets it go, mirroring Regulus's position on his back, looking up at the ceiling above them. He can feel the sweat cooling on his skin.

“Who are they?” he asks after a few moments.

“Who?” Regulus still sounds breathless.

James lifts his arm, pointing at the painting on the ceiling before looking over at Reg. “The room made itself for you, right?”

Regulus nods slowly, eyes running over the different painted figures, chewing on his bottom lip. It's a few seconds before he answers.

“It's a Muggle painting,” he says finally, then, after a short pause. “My favourite.”

James is still looking at him, drinking in his profile. The ridge of his nose. The valleys of his cheeks. “You know a lot about Muggle art?”

Regulus shrugs. “We have a summer home in Scotland. I used to sneak out sometimes, go into the city, go to the galleries.”

James laughs. “Only you would break the rules so you could go to a museum.”

“Excuse me for being cultured,” Regulus says with a huff, though James can tell he isn't really annoyed.

“So,” James prods, grinning a little, “who are they?”

Regulus swallows. “That’s Achilles,” he points to the blond man who seems to be rather dramatically pushing everyone away, “and that’s Patroclus,” he points to the pale body in his arms.

“He’s dead yeah? Pat-row-what’s-his-face?”

Regulus smiles a little. “Patroclus. And yes. He’s dead,” that sits between them as they both look up, James taking in the heartbroken expressions on the painted faces.

“They were lovers,” Regulus goes on eventually, “knew each other their whole lives, fought beside each other, they were inseparable.”

“What happened?” James asks, feeling a new twinge in his stomach at the image floating above them.

“Patroclus decided to do something stupid and noble, got himself killed. It destroyed Achilles, he basically lost his mind after that. He refused to burry him at first, and when he finally let them burn the body he made his men promise that when he died they would mix his ashes with Patroclus’s, so that they could be together.”

James lets out a low whistle. “Jeez Reg, that’s like the most depressing story I have ever heard.”

Regulus laughs, the noise curling around James and making him warm. “It’s—yeah—yeah a bit. But, I don’t know. They loved each other. They loved each other more than anything else in the world, more than power, more than glory, more than winning the war. I’ve never seen that in real life—never seen people love like nothing else matters. It aches but...in a good way, you know?”

Finally, Regulus turns his head to look at him, and James feels his chest swell.

“Yeah,” he says after a moment, reaching forward to tuck a dark curl behind Regulus’s ear. “Yeah I know.”

Regulus rolls onto his side and they’re kissing again, slowly, softly, without a purpose. James runs his hand up Regulus’s back, cupping his head.

“I think he was a wizard,” Regulus says when they break apart.

“Who?” James asks, brain fuzzy.

“Achilles,” Regulus is practically whispering, their faces close together, “in the Muggle story his mother is a nymph and she hates Patroclus because he’s only human and she wants her son to be with a god.”

James can see how Regulus might relate to that—a mother obsessed with status.

“But Achilles doesn’t care,” Regulus goes on, “he never gives Patroclus up, not even at the end, not even in death.” Reg brings his hand to James’s face, thumb brushing his cheek.

“You think the gods were wizards?” James asks after a while.

Regulus shrugs. “Some of them, maybe.”

“And Achilles fell in love with a Muggle?”

Regulus kisses him again. “It’s just a theory,” he says against his lips.

But it doesn’t sound like it’s “just” anything to Regulus.

They stay like that, tangled up in one another, sometimes talking, sometimes not. James has never felt this before—this profound comfort. He kisses Regulus until he’s soft and warm, he kisses him until his edges start to dull, until he nestles his head against James’s chest.

I love you, James thinks. Nearly says out loud. Except he knows it’s too soon. Knows it’ll bring the fear back to Regulus’s body. So he holds his tongue. But he thinks it—thinks it into every stroke of his back, every kiss to the top of his head.

I love you.

I love you.

I love you.

“James?” the voice that pulls him out of his sleep is soft and close. “James?”

He cracks his eyes open, just enough to see Regulus’s face on the pillow next to him. He leans forward automatically, sleepily pressing their mouths together.

“Merlin, James!” Regulus laughs, and James likes that, so he keeps kissing, kisses the laughter right out of his mouth.

“We fell asleep,” Regulus tries to say between their lips.

“Hmm,” James is barely paying attention, Regulus’s body is sleep warm and inviting and his hands swallow it up.

“James it’s seven in the morning.”

It takes a minute for that to sink in. And then—

“Oh shit!”

He practically rolls off the bed, scrounging around on the floor for his clothes. “Shit, shit, shit,” he hisses as he pulls up his trousers.

“Sorry,” Regulus yawns from the bed. “I didn’t mean to fall asleep.”

“You do not apologize for a single thing that happened last night,” James says, twirling about himself as he looks for his shirt. “You were bloody fantastic. I’m just an idiot—ah ha!”

He snatches the shirt up off the floor by the foot of the bed, awkwardly shoving it over his head. When his face pokes through the collar he gets a look at Regulus properly for the first time, sitting crosslegged in the middle of the mattress, shirt untucked, curls a mess. James groans.

“Merlin, look at you.”

Regulus quirks his brow. “Look at me?”

But James is already crawling towards him, kissing him again, and Regulus is laughing again, and it’s really all a very vicious cycle.

“You’re beautiful,” James murmurs into his mouth.

Regulus pushes him away, eyes bright and cheeks flushed. “Go you lunatic,” he huffs, “before my brother sends out a fucking search party for you.”

“Ugh,” James pulls himself back off the bed. “Good point.” He grabs his wand and shoves the map in his waistband. “Alright, I guess…” he gets as far as the door before looking back, Regulus still where he left him.

“You’re okay?” James asks. And he means so much. He means about all of it. About everything.

“Yeah James,” Regulus says slowly. “Yeah, I’m okay. I might even be happy, if you can believe it.”

James feels his face ache with the size of the smile that spreads across it. “Merry Christmas Regulus.”

“Merry Christmas James.”

I love you.

I love you.

I love you.

He’s halfway back to the dorms when he remembers that he left the invisibility cloak stashed up in the astronomy tower, by the time he runs up to get it and comes back the morning is

well on its way. If he had been thinking he would have used the cloak. It would have made sneaking up to his room without attracting any attention a trifle easier.

But he isn't thinking.

So when the portrait swings open and he darts inside he, of course, finds himself face to face with Sirius.

"Oh—"

They both freeze, looking at one another. Sirius has deep purple circles under his eyes, hair less of an artful mess than it usually is and more of just a general disaster, much like James's.

"Long walk," Sirius breaks the silence. Voice flat.

"Er—yeah," James responds helplessly.

Sirius gives him a once over before brushing past. "The shower should be free, Moony just finished."

"Right, thanks," James wants to say more—so much more—but he doesn't even know where to start.

"Oh and James?"

He turns around, Sirius halfway out of the portrait already.

"Your shirt's inside-out."

James blinks, looks down at himself, blinks again. "Shit I—" but Sirius is gone. "Shit."

For some reason he feels the need to right this wrong immediately, dropping the cloak at his feet and pulling his shirt over his head.

"Owe owe!"

He's halfway through putting it back on when he looks up to see Alice, Marlene and Lily, walking down the stairs into the common room.

"Take it off Potter!" Alice teases.

"Har har har," James yanks the shirt over his head.

"Going our way?" she asks, nodding towards the corridor.

James shakes his head. "Nah, I gotta shower still."

"Aren't those the clothes you were wearing last night?" Marlene asks, wrinkling her nose.

"Uh, yeah?" James feels like he's literally vibrating with all the adrenaline pumping through him. "Couldn't sleep, went for a walk, just got back, now I'm gonna take a shower. That okay

with you McKinnon?”

“Merlin Potter, take a breath once and a while,” Alice says before looking over his shoulder. “Lily, dear, something wrong?”

Lily seems to have momentarily stalled on the stairs, eyes staring dazedly at James.

“Evans?” he asks, a little concerned.

“Ah,” Alice leans into James’s side. “I think your little show may have entranced her.”

That seems to wake Lily up. “What?” she says, and then quickly; “Lets go, weren’t we going?” She makes a b-line for the portrait, freckled cheeks flushed and eyes determinedly not on James.

Alice laughs as Lily starts dragging Marlene away by the arm. “Well, guess we’re suddenly in a rush,” she knocks James’s shoulder. “I’ll see you before London yeah?”

“Er—yeah” James says as he watches the girls file out of the portrait, feeling not at all certain that he knows what just happened.

He scoops the cloak up off the floor in a daze, taking the stairs two at a time up to the bedroom.

“Merlin Prongs, where the hell have you been?” Peter asks as James collapses onto his bed.

“Out. Walk,” he waves his hand lazily in the air and hears Peter snort.

“You sound like you’re still drunk.”

James only grunts, not bothering to correct him. His eyes drifting closed. He hears the sound of the door opening and closing as Peter heads down to breakfast.

I might even be happy.

Regulus had said that.

Had had said that because of James.

He replays the memory a few more times, Regulus messy and soft and laughing. He feels like he’s floating.

“James?”

He opens his eyes to find Remus hovering over him, hair wet from the shower, expression concerned. “Are you okay?”

James laughs, startling him. “Yeah, yeah I’m good Moony,” he pulls himself up, scrubbing at his face. “There any hot water left?”

Remus's grimaces. "Some, I'd give it a minute. You know how Padfoot is, bloody boils himself."

James snorts, watching Remus fold up his pyjamas and fit them in his luggage.

"You excited to go home?"

Remus shrugs, pausing for a minute before straightening up. "I'm excited there's no full moon over the break." He offers James a weak smile.

"You know if there was I'd make you come to mine," because it's true, they've done it before.

Remus nods, "Yeah I know James."

"Good. You'll come over anyway yeah? For New Years Eve? Petes coming too."

"I er—" his face looks tight and he starts fiddling with his luggage again. "I don't know, I might stay with my mum, she gets lonely."

James's eyes narrow. "Remus?" he prods, because they both know that that isn't true. Remus's parents are alright, they're no Walburga, but James knows Remus hates that house. The delicacy of it. The guilt that his parents have never been able to let go of. The realities they never seem to accept.

The other boy sighs. "I just think...I think Sirius might not want me there. That's all. It's not a big deal."

James swings his legs off the bed, walking over to Remus's side. "He wants you there," James says with absolute certainty.

"James—"

"I know you're fighting," he cuts the other boy off, "but I also know Sirius. I know he wants you there. And I know I want you there. And Peter wants you there. And my mother really wants you there. Between you and I, you've always been her favourite," that gets a soft laugh out of Remus. "But don't tell Padfoot I said that."

"Cross my heart," Remus makes the motion with his fingers and James smiles.

"So really," he goes on, "the only thing that matters, is whether or not you want to be there?"

There's a pause, Remus pulling his lower lip anxiously between his teeth, not really looking at James.

"I do," he says eventually. "Course I do."

"Good man," James slaps him on the shoulder, "it's settled then." He tosses the map and his wand onto his bed before moving towards the thoroughly debauched looking bathroom.

“James?” Remus calls to him as he gets to the door, causing James to turn around. “Thank you.”

James nods, wishing he could say more but not at all sure how to say any of it without making things worse.

“You’re not alone Remus,” is what comes out of him in the end, his friend’s eyes widening, “okay?”

Remus nods. “Okay.”

And James wonders if one day he’ll actually be able to convince all the people he loves that it’s true.

Chapter End Notes

Hello Lovelies!

Gosh, they're so cute! I should warn you, that things are maybe going to be much less cute in the next chapter so, brace yourselves.

Also, if you're interested, this is the painting they're talking about:

<https://www.nationalgalleries.org/art-and-artists/5009/achilles-lamenting-death-patroclus>

As always, your comments are sunshine and rainbows, thanks so much!

Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Welcome to the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black.

Chapter Notes

TW: Sexual assault (not graphically described)

TW: Child Abuse (Mostly magical, mostly psychological, a little physical)

TW: Trauma/PTSD/Anxiety/Panic Attack

TW: Threatened forced outing (Idk if this is a TW but, like, just incase)

OKAY as you can tell this is heavy, hopefully done in a way that is respectful of all these experiences

Last thing: the purpose of this is to understand Regulus, it's not to excuse him, or any of the bad things he may or may not do in this or any future chapters

Alright sorry I'm done, I promise to stop ranting at the top of these chapters

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Regulus was eleven the first time he fell in love with James Potter. It was really rather inconvenient, since he had already decided to hate him. Not for any of the obvious reasons—the tension between their families, the impending war—but because, until Sirius went to Hogwarts, Regulus had been his best friend. They would make forts, and read stories, and go for adventures in the back garden. When Regulus had a nightmare Sirius was there. When their mother was angry Sirius was there. When their father got sick Sirius was there.

But the summer after his first year at Hogwarts all Sirius could talk about was James Potter. James Potter this and James Potter that and oh wasn't he so fantastic. Regulus quickly grew to despise him. A feeling his mother seemed to share. It wasn't that her and Sirius had ever gotten along particularly well, Sirius had never been very good at being quiet or sitting still or keeping his clothes clean. But they didn't start hating each other until Sirius went to Hogwarts. Until James Potter came along.

So when he boarded the train the following September, with his mother whispering viscously in his ear about all the things she would do to him if he was to find himself sorted into Gryffindor like his brother, Regulus already hated James Potter. More than he had ever hated anyone else in his little eleven year old life.

Sirius had dragged him into the compartment with his friends, and Lupin had been kind and Pettigrew a little jumpy and Potter—Potter barely looked at him. A nod of the head, that was all, before him and Sirius were talking to one another a mile a minute, making jokes that Regulus didn't understand and telling stories he wasn't a part of. And the whole time James Potter didn't look at him once! Which was infuriating, because how was he supposed to communicate his intense dislike of the boy if he wouldn't even give him the time of day?

Of course, this all became less of an issue after the sorting. Slytherins and Gryffindors are natural enemies. They rarely interact except when forced and besides, Regulus was a first year, a little kid. It had never mattered to Sirius before that he was younger but—now he had Potter. So Regulus didn't see his brother much. Or his brother's friends. And mostly, he felt lost. He drifted through his classes, quiet and reserved, not wanting to draw too much attention to himself. Not wanting to be noticed. That was how he had always survived at Grimmauld Place. He assumed it would work at Hogwarts too.

He was wrong.

A few weeks into school Severus Snape found him kissing a boy. Or—perhaps more accurately—found a boy kissing Regulus. At eleven, Regulus didn't much fancy kissing anyone, he found the whole thing rather unbecoming if he was being honest. But Roger Flint was older, and bigger, and didn't seem to care one way or the other what Regulus wanted. He tried to explain this to Snape, after Flint ran off, but Snape was kind enough to inform Regulus that it didn't matter. People would think he was a freak either way. So it was in his best interest to do what Snape said, and that way no one would find out.

It had not occurred to eleven year old Regulus that Severus Snape, who barely had the strength in his lanky limbs to lift his own wand, was not going to out Roger Flint to the entire school. All he knew was that he didn't want Sirius to know.

Oh how little things change.

So he did as Snape asked: “My homework Black” “My Laundry Black” “Push that Hufflepuff down the stairs Black.” Regulus did all of it. Unlike Sirius, he had always been good at doing what he was told.

A few months later, he watched James Potter punch Severus Snape in the face outside of the great hall. And, well, it was hard not to fall in love with him after that.

Regulus takes these memories and puts them in a box. And then he buries it. He digs deep inside himself, for the darkest, lowest corner, and he puts it there. He puts all of James there. You do not walk into Grimmauld Place with your walls down.

“Mistress Black is out for the afternoon but she tells Kreacher to inform his Young Master Regulus that she will be returning for supper at six o'clock sharp.”

Regulus nods, standing awkwardly in the middle of his bedroom, feeling like a ghost. A stranger.

“Kreacher is making Master Regulus’s favourite, roast pheasant.”

Regulus looks down at the elf and forces himself to smile. “Thank you Kreacher, I really appreciate it.”

The elf preens. “Of course Master, Kreacher wants always to be a good help to the noble house of Black.”

Regulus swallows. “You are. Always.”

He needs to get himself more under control, he knows that, he’s letting it all get to him. The grey walls, the heavy smell of the air, the missing photos on the walls. He can’t be full of cracks the first time he sees her.

“Is—is my father up?” he asks finally.

Kreacher nods. “Yes sir, he is very, very excited to be seeing Master Regulus Sir,” the elf does his best attempt at a smile, the sight oddly endearing despite all the teeth. “He will be taking his tea now Sir, in his bed.”

Regulus nods. “Excellent, thank Kreacher, that’s all for now.”

Kreacher gives him a bow apparating out of the room before his head is raised.

Regulus closes his eyes, feeling the walls as much as he sees them. The weight of them, the pressure. There’s never any air in this fucking house. He breathes in deep, trying to calm the anxious tremors running up and down his bones. He exhales. All of these feelings are useless and he needs to be done with them. There’s no point in being afraid here. Better to wrap himself in a layer of apathy, of disinterest.

Nothing matters. If nothing matters than nothing hurts.

He opens his eyes, blinking the dim room back into focus and feeling the beginning of a familiar numbness spread through him. Good, he thinks, flexing his fingers, releasing some of the tension from his muscles.

There is no privacy in Grimmauld Place. The walls are covered in the shadowy silhouettes of the Blacks of yore. They whisper and scowl and scurry about. And all of them belong to his mother. Bend to her will. He feels their eyes on him now as he walks stiffly down to the floor below, their gazes making his skin itch.

Inhale. Exhale.

Nothing matters.

He pauses at his father’s open door, his parents don’t share a bedroom of course, they haven’t since Regulus was young. Since before his father got sick. In his memories, his father is a

towering figure, with big warm hands and a domineering presence. He never spoke much, even back then, always quiet. Regulus knows that he takes after his father, just as he knows that Sirius takes after their mother. He's sure they've both ached over that truth.

Now his father is sitting in a chair by the window, flannel housecoat wrapped around him, dark hair shot through with white, the curls, once so like Regulus's, gone limp.

Inhale. Exhale.

Nothing matters.

"Papa?"

The older man's head snaps to the doorway, on edge, suspicious, before he finds Regulus's face and then he smiles. For a moment, it almost doesn't look like he's dying.

"Reggie!" he makes to stand but falters, his strength gone. Regulus has no doubt that Kreacher is the one who helped him into that chair in the first place. He crosses the room quickly so that his father won't try again, bending down so that he can wrap his arms around him.

"Look at you," his father gushes as keeps his hands on Regulus's shoulders even as he straightens up. "You've grown."

Regulus rolls his eyes. "It's been three months."

But his father only grins. "Ah, not up but in, mon chou, your eyes are far wiser than they were this summer."

Regulus feels the twinge of something in his chest but quickly smothers it. It will not serve him to remember everything that has changed since the summer. Not here. Not now.

"Viens," his father gestures to the chair across from him, "asseyez-vous, asseyez-vous. Parle à ton père pendant un moment, parle-moi de ta vie, je deviens fou coincé dans cette pièce." His french is rapid, one word blending into the next. Orion spent most of his childhood growing up in the french countryside, so when he's tired, or drunk, or sick, it's the language that spills out of him. Regulus has always loved the way his father speaks French, the deep way his voice wraps around the vowels and hugs the end of each word. Slow and smooth, in a way English never can be.

His mother hates it, but it's only because she's not very good at it. Expensive tutors are no substitute for the real thing, and Walburga cannot stand to be outdone in anything.

"Okay, okay," Regulus takes a seat. "There's really not that much to say—I study, I play quidditch, that's it," he shrugs.

His father makes a scoffing noise, leaning slightly forward in his chair. "More than play, you think you could pull off a Wronski Feint and Horace wouldn't tell me, huh?"

Regulus feels himself blush. "It wasn't that impressive."

“Please, I hear the scouts are already talking about you. You never know, you might be the youngest player to sign with a major team in quidditch history huh? On ne sait jamais.”

Don’t we? Regulus almost says. Because they both know that even if he was approached by a team—next year, two years from now—Walburga would never allow it. He is needed for the cause. Everything else is dust.

“Maybe,” he answers instead, looking out the window, the sky is nearly as grey as the wallpaper. “They really keep you coup’d up in here all the time?”

His father makes irritated grumble. “Bloody healers. Won’t let me do anything.”

“They’re only trying to help.”

“That’s certainly what they say.”

Regulus rolls his eyes, turning back to his father who instantly holds his hands up in surrender. “Merde Reggie, don’t look at me like that. I’m following orders, doing what they say, I swear mon petit.”

“You better be.”

“I am, I am, why do you think I’m so miserable huh?” he shoots Regulus a playful grin that the younger boy does his best to return.

“Okay then.”

“Okay then,” his father mockingly repeats.

“I don’t sound like that.”

“You absolutely do mon chou.”

Instead of responding Regulus reaches for one of the biscuits on the untouched plate in front of him, eyeing his father’s thin frame as he takes his first bite.

“You’re not eating,” he says after he swallows. It’s not a question. His father is a shell of what he once was, shoulders slumped, skin hanging off his bones in unnatural ways.

“I eat,” his father says dismissively, but Regulus only scowls, shoving the rest of his cookie in his mouth.

“Not enough.”

Orion laughs. “Jeez, who is the parent here?”

I don’t know, Regulus thinks, you tell me. But for the second time he holds his tongue.

His father pauses then, eyes flicking nervously towards the door.

“She’s not here,” Regulus says, answering the question that wasn’t asked.

Orion nods. "Have you spoken to your brother?"

Regulus's heart drops. Sirius is a dangerous topic in this household and he's not sure he's up for the task of walking through that minefield right now.

"Yes," he says slowly, not sure what else he can say, not when his father is looking at him like that. "He's...well."

His father smiles softly. "That's good."

Regulus only nods, looking back out the window.

There was a wedge, between him and Sirius, the moment his brother could escape. The moment he didn't have to rely on Regulus's company alone anymore. But it wasn't until last summer that Regulus thinks his brother really lost faith in him. It wasn't the night he left—nothing so explosive and obvious. It was a quiet moment, Regulus leaning against the doorway of Sirius's bedroom, Sirius ignoring him.

"I don't know what you want me to do Sirius," he'd asked, feeling equal parts annoyed and apologetic.

Sirius had sighed, rubbing his eyes like talking with Regulus was exhausting. Maybe it was.

"I want you to fight back," Sirius had said finally, the first words he'd spoken to Regulus all day. "Fight back."

Regulus answered before he could think better of it, before he could remember who he was speaking to;

"What's the point?"

Sirius had looked at him then, looked at him like he had never seen him before. Like he had no idea who he was. And maybe he didn't.

"Regulus?"

He's on his feet instantly, arms stiff at his sides as his mother opens the door to his room. She is a slight woman, dark hair pulled back tightly, dark robes pooling at her feet when she stands. She has Sirius's eyes.

"Maman," he says stiffly, unsure which of her faces intends to show itself today.

Her eyes run him over before stepping forward, taking his chin sharply between her index finger and thumb. "You look thin."

He doesn't know what to say to that so he says nothing, remaining compliant and silent as she looks him over.

"And your hair too long."

He sometimes envies muggles, who have to put so much energy and intent behind all their actions, who have to walk everywhere, and pick everything up, and wait for things to finish. It all means so much less to wizards. It's all too easy. Too quick. The words are barely out of his mother's mouth before he feels the icy fingers of her magic. Curls falling lifeless at his feet. He looks down for a moment, mournful.

"Better," his mother steps back, admiring her handiwork. "Your grades are good?" she asks sharply, the change in topic sudden but not surprising. Walburga is rarely wasteful with her words when it comes to her children.

"Yes."

She nods. "Come down, supper is ready. Tomorrow your cousins will be here."

Regulus feels his stomach clench as she walks towards the door.

"When are they coming?" he hopes she doesn't hear the tension in his voice.

"Noon," Walburga tosses over her shoulder, already in the hall.

Regulus lets out a shaky breath, then lifts his hand to his newly cut hair. Well, cut is a bit generous. The hair is short and prickly and close to the scalp. Not completely gone, but about as short as it is possible to go. It shouldn't ache. He's not sure why it does.

He vanishes the hair on the floor on his way out the door.

He wants to fly but there's no room. Not here in the city. Hidden behind layers and layers of secrecy charms. So he goes for a run instead.

The air is crisp, the pavement freshly cleared of snow. Regulus can see his breath freeze outside his lips as he forces it out of his lungs again and again. He's not sure how long he's been gone for, a while, if the aching in his muscles is anything to go by. Still, it's not enough, still he can't get himself to still, to quiet down. So he keeps going. Block after block. The sun is now fully in the sky, a bright day for December, though it has no warmth.

He doesn't allow himself to think about anything except taking the next step, except fighting the weakness in his legs. He blocks out the world beyond London. Beyond Grimmauld. He doesn't think about Hogwarts. Or about anything that transpired within it. And whenever those thoughts or feelings try to drag themselves to the surface he gets a new box. He digs a new hole. He buries himself deeper and deeper.

He can barely stand when he gets home.

“Master Regulus has missed his breakfast,” Kreacher says unhappily as Regulus drags himself into the kitchen, showered and clothed and light headed.

“Sorry Kreacher,” he says as he sits down at the work table, watching the elf rush about, preparing for lunch.

“Kreacher is told by Mistress that he cannot feed Regulus now, that he will have to wait for his cousins.”

Regulus nods slowly, resting his chin on his folded arms, and taking in a deep breath. It smells of caramelized onions and roast beef. His stomach responds accordingly.

Kreacher shoots him a look over his shoulder, but Regulus doesn’t move.

“I’ll wait,” he says, reassuring the elf.

But Kreacher only shakes his head. “I cannot be feeding Master Regulus, you understand? I have been told so, so I will not,” Regulus is opening his mouth to once again affirm that he understands when a plate of bread and cheeses appears in front of him.

“He would like to help Master Regulus very much but he simply cannot go against his Mistress’s wishes.”

Regulus blinks, lifting his head up off his arms, a small smile pulling at his mouth.

“Thanks Kreacher,” he reaches for the food, that much hungrier now that it was in front of him.

“Do not be thanking me, I am doing nothing,” but he swears he sees the elf wink.

Regulus has always liked the kitchen the best, maybe because it’s the the warmest place in the house, or because Kreacher always gives him some of what he’s cooking. Probably, he imagines, it’s because the rest of his family never really come in here. Not even Sirius, when he was still around. It’s a nice escape. A place where he can breathe a little easier.

It’s partially underground, the window above the sink level with the grass in the garden, the walls made of an untreated stone, the fireplace enormous and deep—allowing for all manner of cooking and brewing. The floor and table are unvarnished wood—everything in this space is soft and natural and lacking the artifice that is strewn throughout the rest of the house. There are no portraits, no gaudy embellishments, nothing is covered in gold or ivory. Regulus imagines that this is what a real home is meant to feel like.

He forces himself to relax as he eats, forces his shoulders down from his neck, forces his muscles to let go.

Inhale. Exhale.

Nothing matters.

He's okay. This is okay. He's done it a dozen times before, there's no reason for it to be any different now.

The feeling, when it comes, is like falling into to a frozen lake but slowly. It starts at his head and trickles through his body, his hands freezing on their way to his mouth and then suddenly dropping back to the table.

Stand up.

And he does. Before he can think about the fact that the voice isn't his own or that an unnatural calm has suddenly settled around his bones.

Turn around.

Bellatrix is grinning at him, wild brown curls cascading down her back as Rodolphus throws himself into the chair beside Regulus, looking entirely bored by the situation.

"Oh wittle Wegulus," she presses the tip of her wand to his forehead and he wants to move, he does, wants to knock it away, but he can't. He can't move. He can barely think.

"You never learn do you?" She draws the wand down his nose, his lips, flicking it off the edge of his chin.

On your knees, says the voice in his head.

His body drops with a painful crack onto the hard stone floor. He can feel himself tremble, hear the laboured breath in his ears. She's in his head. In his skin.

"What trick should he do next?" she stalks around him, hand running over his shaved head. Rodolphus leans forward, elbows on his knees, face coming into view. Regulus can't turn his head, can't follow his cousin's path, can't look away from her husband's empty eyes.

"Bark," he says, an ugly smile stretching his face.

Bellatrix laughs.

Bark, commands the voice.

Bark, bark, bark.

And he does. On his knees, he barks.

"Enough enough," Bellatrix stops in front of him, still laughing.

Stop.

He goes quiet, throat raw, struggling to push back against her presence inside his head and failing. He fails every time.

Bellatrix sticks out her foot, sleek black leather pushing into the centre of his chest. He barely notices. His ribs already feel too tight. His lungs barely able to breathe.

“Kiss it,” she says, amusement clear in her voice, Rodolphus snorting in the background.

Kiss it.

He tries. Really. Tries to pull his will power out from behind the veil of the spell. But it’s nothing but a distant yell. A muffled voice. So he does as he’s told. Doesn’t he always?

“Oh here you are,” it’s his mother, he can’t see her because Bellatrix hasn’t ordered him to look, hasn’t allowed him to take his mouth off her shoe. But he doesn’t need to. He would know her voice anywhere.

There’s a brief pause, he isn’t sure what her face is doing, what she thinks about the scene in front of her.

“Come, lunch is ready, Narcissa and Lucius are in the dinning room,” and then, almost as an after thought; “honestly Regulus, you must learn to strengthen your mind. We practiced this.”

They did.

Over and over again.

By the end of the summer Regulus had felt raw with it, like his body had been turned inside out.

He hears the sounds of his mother’s shoes as she walks away.

“Pity,” Bellatrix throws him off her foot, “looks like play time’s over.”

He gasps as the spell lets go, as he comes crashing back down into his body, catching himself on his hands as they tremble along with the rest of him.

“Come now little cousin, we don’t want to keep your maman waiting.”

He can’t lift his head, it’s too heavy, the room spinning. He watches their feet—Rodolphus getting out of his chair, the pair of them sauntering into the hallway.

Inhale. Exhale.

His skin is clammy, drenched in a cold sweat.

Inhale. Exhale.

He barely has time to turn his head before he’s retching all over the kitchen floor. He doesn’t know how their can be so much when he’s barely eaten. You’d think after all this time he’d be used to this feeling, but it never gets easier. Being invaded. It never gets easier and he never gets stronger.

Regulus collapses onto his back, chest heaving as he tries to focus on the soothing feeling of the cold floor on his skin. It's only a few moments before Kreacher's worried face appears above him.

"Master Regulus must be getting up now," he says, placing a small hand on Regulus's back and helping him peel himself off the ground. With the snap of his fingers there's a glass of water being pressed to Regulus's lips. He drinks, gratefully.

"Thank you," he croaks. "Sorry about the—" he gestures to the puddle of sick beside them but Kreacher only shakes his head, snapping his fingers again, leaving behind a clean floor.

"What is mess to a house elf?"

Regulus almost smiles.

"Regulus!" his mother's voice rings out. She doesn't scream, she commands. There is a difference.

He winces as he hands the water back to Kreacher and gets unsteadily to his feet. For a second the room sways.

Inhale. Exhale.

"Master Regulus?"

Reg tries to force a smile. "It's fine Kreacher. Just have to make it to the table right?"

He doesn't have to see his face to know how pale he must look. How weak.

"Kreacher will send in soup—"

But Regulus shakes his head. "No, best not to change anything. You know how they are."

Kreacher only stares back at him helplessly.

Regulus keeps his hand pressed to the wall all the way down the hallway to steady himself, only taking it off the minute he comes into view.

The dinning room is largely taken up by a long black table. His mother is at the head, of course, his father nowhere to be seen—in bed Regulus supposes—Bellatrix and Rodolphus on one side, Narcissa and Lucius on the other.

"There he is," Narcissa smiles at him, hair charmed blond to match her fiancé's. She gets out of her chair and pulls him into a hug that Regulus does his best not to flinch away from. He does not want to be touched. Not right now.

"Merlin you're so big, I can't believe it most of the time."

He smiles stiffly as she pulls him into the seat next to her. Lucius nods his head in acknowledgement and Regulus does the same, even though it makes his stomach roil.

There are appetizers on the table, but Regulus isn't sure he can trust himself not to throw them back up just yet so he chooses to focus on his plate. Eyes following the pattern, hands clenched in his lap.

Inhale. Exhale.

Nothing matters.

"You were saying Rodolphus," his mother gives him a detached once over before returning her attention to her nieces's husband.

"Minchum has agreed to put more Dementors around Azkaban, he'll announce it next week, new security measures. Put all the troublesome Death Eaters in their place."

Regulus's eyes rise at that, at the bubbling laugh that comes out of Bellatrix's mouth.

"He doesn't know then?" Walburga asks mildly.

"Minchum? Not a clue. He's quite happy with Lucius and I for suggesting it, isn't he Lu?" Rodolphus rips into one of the buns on the table, gesturing to the man across from him.

"Appreciates our no nonsense approach," Lucius says dryly, eliciting more laughter from Bellatrix.

"And the dementors, we can rely on them?" his mother goes on.

Rodolphus shrugs. "Sure, for what we need," he speaks with his mouth still half-full, chewing lazily. "The Ministry's never done anything for them, and our Lord can be so very convincing. Whether or not they'll fight with us I can't say, but I can promise they won't fight against us."

"They'll let the prisoners go then?" Narcissa asks, leaning forward slightly.

Rodolphus nods, swallowing. "We go get 'em, the Dementors will let them walk. No question."

"Good," his mother says, as Regulus feels something start to scratch at the inside of his skin. "It'll make it harder for them to slow us down."

"Not that they were able to do much of that anyway," Lucius says dryly, smug looks and low chuckles exchanged around the table.

There's a 'woosh' of air, and suddenly steaming pots and dishes appear before them.

"Ah, excellent," his mother sits up straighter, "everyone, lunch is served."

Several hours later they're still talking. Meals never last a reasonable time with them, drifting into the late afternoon and early evening. Once a sufficient number of brandies and wine

glasses have been had Regulus slips away.

It's a relief, the quiet darkness of his room. For a moment he leans his forehead against the wall and exhales.

Nothing matters.

Nothing matters.

Nothing matters.

He thinks about visiting his father but he's worried he'll wake him up—or that they'd hear him downstairs. That they'd realize he'd left. No, better to stay here. Quiet.

It wasn't until last summer that he realized what a shield Sirius had been for him. It was easy to disappear when his brother was around. Pathetic, he knew, but Sirius always handled it so well. Got up from every hit like he couldn't even feel it. Nothing seemed to touch him. Meanwhile to Regulus everything feels like water in his lungs.

The door opens and Regulus whips around, Lucius knocking the wand out of his hand with the flick of his own.

Fuck.

"Hiding are you?" the older man smiles, crowding him against the wall. His breath smells of alcohol.

"Go away Lucius." He doesn't look at his face, but somewhere off his left shoulder, safer that way.

"Tisk, tisk, not very nice of you," he grabs hold of Regulus's jaw, pulling it forward with a grip that will no doubt bruise. "We've talked about that mouth of yours."

For the second time that day Regulus feels like he's going to be sick. Lucius is too close—too fucking close and he can't—he can't breathe. He can't stand all these hands on him. It makes something deep inside him ache.

He would speak, but Lucius's grip is too tight.

His mouth too suffocating, pressing into him.

Inhale. Exhale.

Nothing matters. If nothing matters than nothing hurts.

Regulus brings his knee to meet Lucius's stomach, taking the older man by surprise, which is enough to let Regulus throw him off, making a dive for his wand which sits on the floor by the door. His fingers have only just wrapped around the handle when he feels a sharp pain shoot through him, Lucius's pointed dress shoe ramming itself into his side. He isn't fast

enough, he never is. Suddenly he finds himself on his back, Lucius's foot pressing down on his chest.

"What the hell was that you little brat," he spits, wand aimed at Regulus's face. His chest struggles against Lucius's weight.

"I'm not doing this Lucius—I'm not doing this anymore."

Lucius arches his eyebrow, "You're not doing this anymore?" he repeats icily, pushing down on Regulus for emphasis, forcing a gasp out of him as the air rips from his body.

"They'll notice you've gone," he's feeling desperate now, hand groping around on the floor for his wand, not sure where it went after he got kicked.

A sickening leer carves itself into Lucius's mouth. "You think they'll care?"

Regulus swallows with great difficulty. "Narcissa will care," he manages to force out. "So if you want her to pump out your pureblood pups you'll get the fuck out of my room before I start screaming."

Regulus never knows what Sirius would do in these situations. Though he imagines he probably doesn't find himself in them very often. Nobody looks at Sirius and thinks "weak."

Lucius's eyes are intense as he bends forward, bringing their faces closer together and tilting his to the side. Like Regulus is an exhibit he's trying to puzzle out. And then he smiles.

"Oh Regulus, have you found yourself a boy?"

Regulus grits his teeth, feeling the box rattle down inside him. But he keeps it closed. He keeps it buried, keeps his thoughts empty of faces and voices and hands that never ask for more than he can give.

"Does he know that this is what you're really like?" Lucius lets out a cruel laugh. "A worm? Pathetic and grovelling and used?"

It shouldn't hurt. He doesn't know why it does.

A few moments of tense silence pass before Lucius straightens up, taking his foot off of Regulus and smoothing out his robes.

"Have it your way," he says loftily, Regulus gasping on the floor below him, "but you know," he goes on as he pauses by the door, the light from the hallway cutting brutally through the dark room, "he'll figure it out eventually. What a sad little thing you are. And I can't imagine he'll want you after that."

Regulus doesn't move until he's alone again. Sitting up against the wall and pulling his knees in, resting his head on top of them.

Inhale. Exhale.

Inhale. Exhale.

Inhale. Exhale.

He wonders, absentmindedly, if other people have to remind themselves to breathe, or if that's just him?

You see, Roger Flint was the first boy who didn't care what Regulus wanted. But he wasn't the last.

I want you to fight back. That's what Sirius had said. The truth is, Regulus doesn't stay because he feels very strongly about his family's cause. About the supremacy of purebloods. He supposes maybe they have a point sometimes, he isn't sure. But really, Regulus stays because he doesn't think Sirius's side can win. That they stand any chance at all. His parents, their friends, they have so much power. So much money and influence. I want you to fight back, Sirius had said. But what's the point? What's the point of fighting for a lost cause?

Regulus spends Christmas morning with his father. Kreacher helps him bring him down to the living room, where the fire is lit and the tree is sparkling and his father makes him open all his gifts like he's still a little kid. They drink hot chocolate and eat pancakes.

His father starts singing a terribly off-key version of jingle bells and when Regulus can't get him to stop he joins in.

His mother is out. She has meetings. According to his father she has a lot of those these days, though he's rather vague about who they're with or what they're about. Regulus doesn't push the matter. He doesn't really want to know.

"Do you remember when you were six—"

"I already don't like where this is going," Regulus laughs from the floor, he's resting on his hand, legs stretched out in front of him as he looks up at his father. He's still in his pyjama's even though it's nearly one, his father too, though these days he's rarely in anything else. In the background Celestina Warbeck's Christmas record is on.

"No, no, this is a good one," his father grins.

"Uh-huh, I'm not sure our definitions of good are the same but go on."

"Oh il pense qu'il est si drôle—a little respect wouldn't kill you huh?" he winks at Regulus who rolls his eyes. "You were barely up to here," he holds his hand out at waist height. "And you followed Sirius everywhere he went, you two were absolutely inseparable."

I followed him everywhere until the day he got on that train, Regulus thinks but doesn't say. His father is rarely in so good a mood, and he doesn't want to ruin it.

“And it had snowed all night, the hills were practically up to my neck—“

“You’re exaggerating.”

“Pfft, I am not, there’ll be pictures somewhere I’m sure. Anyway, we turned our backs on you for two seconds, I swear, we were—I don’t know—cleaning up the kitchen or something. And then you were gone, poof!”

“We were six and seven, I find it hard to believe we were quite that stealthy.”

“Oh but you were, we searched the whole house, calling out your names, your mother was absolutely beside herself, and then, I looked out the window and I saw a little red shirt tied to a stick on top of snowbank.”

Regulus actually does remember this. Remembers how badly his hands stung from digging in the snow, remembers how pleased he was when Sirius told him he was doing a good job.

“So we go outside only to see that you two have turned the entire back garden into a snow fort and Sirius comes wandering out and informs us, quite formally, that we are on his property.”

Regulus remembers that too, remembers staying behind, inside their little snow tunnels, watching Sirius face their parents, alone. Always alone.

“Said he was going to be living in his fort and that since he was no longer under our roof, he no longer had to follow our rules.” His father starts to laugh, no longer the big boisterous sound it once was but quiet, rough. Ending in a cough.

“Are you okay papa?” Regulus moves forward, placing his hand on his father’s back.

“Oui, oui, I’m fine Reggie, I’m fine,” he exhales, leaning back in his chair. “You two were such a pair,” smiles to himself. “You still speak yes, at school?”

“Yes papa,” he lies again. “Yes, all the time.”

“Good, that’s good,” his eyes drift closed, breath still hitching in his chest. It doesn’t take much these days, to wear him out. “La famille est importante ma cher, ton frère par-dessus tout, il s'en remettra...He’ll come back,” his English and French blend together.

No, Regulus doesn’t have the heart to tell him, no I don’t think he will.

“Perhaps it be time to be returning Master Black to his bed?”

Regulus starts at Kreacher’s sudden appearance, hand tightening protectively over his father before he forces himself to relax.

“Yeah, yeah, that’s a good idea,” he looks back down. “Come on dad, lets get you upstairs okay?”

His father grumbles, but doesn’t put up nearly the fight Regulus expects him to.

“Joyeux Noël mon fils,” he mumbles as Regulus helps him into bed, pulling the blankets all the way up to his shoulders. He’s asleep almost as soon as he puts his head on his pillow.

“Joyeux Noël Papa.”

He pauses for a moment, remembering that day in the snow. Sirius had been so excited. This is ours, he’d told Regulus, it’ll be just us here, they can’t come in.

Walburga took his voice for that. One flick of her wand and Sirius couldn’t speak for three days. That, of course, was not part of their father’s story. It never was.

Regulus makes it all the way to the hall outside his bedroom before he stops, looking across the way to the other door. He hasn’t seen it open since last summer. Since he left. It’s foolish really, stupid, but he finds himself moving towards it anyway, finds his hand turning the doorknob.

It even still smells like Sirius—hair products and leather boots. The walls are covered in red and gold, lions roaring overhead. For days last summer their mother had sat in this room trying to peel them off, but whatever spell Sirius used was strong because not a single poster came down.

He hadn’t had time to take anything, the night he left, so his room remains unchanged. Like any minute he might walk back in. Regulus takes a tentative step forward, towards the familiar bed, hands trailing along the walls and dressers, like he’s trying to make sure they’re really there. He used to spend a lot of time in this room. Reading, playing, hiding from monsters.

It feels different from the rest of the house. Even when he’s gone Sirius still has so much presence. He bleeds out of every corner. Undeniable. A force. Regulus sits down on the side of the bed, eyes roaming over the room, catching on a picture on the bedside table. Shaking, his hand reaches out for it, framed in a clunky plastic thing. It’s of Sirius and his friends, somewhere in Hogwarts, maybe third year. James is caught in a laugh, smile spread big across his face as he throws his head back. Regulus knows that laugh, he knows what it sounds like and feels like and tastes like.

The box strains inside him, begging him to open it up, to think all the things he can’t afford to right now. Not while he’s in this house that is so hungry to tear things apart. Still, he slips off the back of the frame and slides the photo into his pocket. Stupid.

He lets out a breath, eyes sweeping over the room one last time before he gets up and heads back into the corridor.

“What are you doing?”

He freezes with his hand on the doorknob.

“Regulus?” his mother says stiffly from the top of the stairs. “What were you doing in there?”

He almost laughs. Because of course. Of course she comes home now.

“I wanted to see if his quidditch gear fit,” he says flatly, a voice he’s perfected over the years. It works on most people.

“Are you lying to me?” she asks, stepping nearer, and Regulus tries to get his pulse under control, the hair raising on the back of his neck as her dark eyes zero in on him.

“No.”

But, of course, it’s too late. He knows what’s going to happen even before she raises her wand. Before she whispers the spell.

It burns when she forces her way into his thoughts, flipping through them like the pages of a book. They whip before his mind’s eye at breakneck speed, making him feel dizzy. But he was careful. He was ready. He’s put all the things that could hurt him away, he’s buried them deep. She won’t find them, she won’t—

Except for the picture. She grabs hold of it, focusing in on the moving faces of the young boys. No, Regulus thinks pathetically, hoping she doesn’t hear, trying to quite his own thoughts, but they persist. No, leave them alone. Leave him alone.

He gasps as she pulls back.

“Give it to me,” she says coldly.

He stares at her, unsure of why this feels like such a betrayal.

“Regulus. Now.”

Slowly he reaches for the photograph, barely getting it out of his pocket before she’s ripping it away from him, eyes never leaving his face even when she sets it on fire, letting it drop to the floor and curl in on itself. Turning to ash.

“He is not your brother,” and Regulus almost sighs with relief that she couldn’t tell who he was focusing on. “Do you understand?”

“Oui maman.”

Her shrewd eyes run him up and down, sending shivers along his spine. “This summer. You will take the mark.”

He blinks. “What?”

“It’s past time. Things are happening Regulus, you need to take your place.”

Sirius’s place you mean—but he doesn’t say it out loud.

“I’m not finished school,” knowing, of course, that it won’t matter.

“And you needn’t be, as if they teach you anything of quality anyway. I only allowed you to return this year because your father insisted.”

He says nothing. He has nothing to say. Nothing that won’t end with him in pain anyway.

“Things are changing Regulus,” she walks away, the picture a cold pile of ash on the floor, “and nothing will be the same once we’re done.”

He wonders if she means for it to sound like a threat. He imagines she probably does.

It was Sirius who taught him the trick with the box. Taught him how to hide things in his own head. He wonders if his brother still does it sometimes. Still hides parts of himself away. Or if now that he’s free of this place he doesn’t need to. If he gets to remember without fear. He’d like to ask him. He’s sure he never will.

He has Kreacher drop him off in London. He’s two hours early for the train but he can’t stand being in that house any more. He doesn’t go to Diagon Alley like he said he would, or to platform 9 3/4. Instead he finds a bench in the muggle train station and sits, leaning back and closing his eyes, listening to the crowds rushing around him, trains arriving and departing, the voice over the loudspeaker buzzing in his ears every five seconds. He feels...delicate. A nervous shaking inside his skin that promises it won’t take much to pull him apart.

“Regulus?”

He starts, eyes flying open, heart jolting against his ribs. His wand is in a holster on the inside of his arm but he doesn’t dare pull it out here.

A middle-aged woman stands over him, she has dark brown hair with a single white streak at the front that has been braided down her back. Her face is kind.

She smiles softly at him. “I’m Euphemia Potter,” she holds out her hand.

Regulus feels something shoot through his chest, something pull at his gut. He blinks up at her and then down at her hand.

“I—“ he shakes himself. “Sorry, Mrs. Potter, it’s nice to meet you,” he reaches out and takes her hand, her grip warm and strong. Now that she’s said it he can’t not see it—the similarities between her and her son. The box rattles again, with all the feelings and thoughts he still doesn’t feel strong enough to face. Not now. Not yet. It’ll be too much.

“Can I sit with you?” she nods to the empty spot beside him.

“Oh—yes, of course.”

He doesn’t know what to do with his hands, eventually finding them fidgeting in his lap, his eyes unable to meet her gaze.

“I see you’re an early bird too huh?” she says kindly. “The boys have gone to Diagon, but I’ve always liked this station, excellent place for people watching.”

The boys.

He’s not sure he can manage this conversation right now, he already feels on the verge of coming apart.

“Are you excited for the new term? I hear you have a quidditch game soon?”

That gets him to look up, meeting her stare head on, he has experience in holding stares but her’s is different. A different kind of intense.

“Have you?” is all he manages to get out, and her smile becomes a bit more mischievous.

“Oh yes, I’ve heard about the feint you pulled so many times I feel like I was there myself.”

He swallows with difficulty, unsure of what to do with the knowledge that he’s been a topic of conversation in the Potter household.

“You know, my son is a bit of an open book,” she goes on. Regulus does know. He’s obsessed with it. He’s afraid of it. “I’m never sure if that means I’ve done something right as a mother or something wrong but it’s too late now either way I suppose.” Her eyes drift out calmly over the rushing people in front of them. “But gosh, did he ever light up when he talked about you.”

She looks back at him and suddenly his chest feels too tight. Please stop, he wants to tell her, but he’s not sure he means it. Part of him is greedy. Is hungry. Is desperate for more.

“Regulus, I want you to know,” she goes on softly. “That our door is always open okay? If you ever need it.”

It’s all a bit too much if he’s being honest. He’s had too many people in his head recently, too many hands on his skin. There is nothing stable about him—he is all weak foundations and cracking beams. His body ready to cave in on itself.

“I—“ he coughs, trying to clear the weakness out of his throat. “I should go, the train.” Even though they both know he has plenty of time. Still, she nods her head, smiling all the same.

“Of course, don’t let me keep you.”

He gets up shakily, hoping he can make it through the barrier in this state.

“It was nice to meet you, Mrs. Potter.”

“Effie, please.”

He nods though he knows he will never call her that. He wonders if Sirius does. Or if he just calls her mum. It’s a title that suits her, far more than it ever has his own mother.

His body feels awkward and out of place as he walks away from her, through the crowd. None of his limbs moving the right way.

Inhale. Exhale.

Nothing matters.

He sleeps for most of the train ride, Evan and Barty bickering with one another in the seats across from him. He makes a point of not looking at anyone on the platform when they arrive, or in the great hall at dinner.

Hours later he finds himself sitting alone in the Slytherin common room. Unable to concentrate on his readings, or do any of the coursework he neglected over the break. He stares into the fire and wonders if he shouldn't just go to bed. If he shouldn't just let this whole thing die. Of course, he's thought that before. Thought it nearly every time. It's not really a question, when the answer is so obvious. He should. Of course he should. Especially in the state he's in.

His foot taps nervously on the floor, eyes flicking up from the fire to the clock on the mantle. He should just go to bed. It would be better for the both of them. He should. He should. He should. He doesn't. Of course. But he should.

He wonders how James will know to come now that he won't be able to see Regulus on the map. He wonders if he'll remember how to get in. He wonders if the room would keep him out if Regulus asked it to. He doesn't—ask it to, that is—but he thinks about it.

He makes a concerted effort not to look at the bed, not to remember the last time he was in this room, the box still closed, though cracks have started to splinter it. Have started to let things leak through. He isn't at all sure he can handle this. Isn't at all sure how to. It's never been this bad. He's never felt this broken apart. It was too quiet in that house, too cold, and now all of the sudden there are so many people and voices and so much heat that he feels like he's burning up.

“You cut your hair.”

Regulus's head snaps up, he doesn't know how he missed the sound of the door opening.

And oh.

Oh.

Oh shit.

Something yanks at his chest. Yanks hard. This was a bad idea. He knew this was a bad idea.

“Yes,” he says, because it feels like James is waiting for some kind of response and that’s all he has. Truthfully, he’d forgotten about his hair. He’s been avoiding mirrors lately, avoiding being confronted with his own face. It’s easier that way.

“I like it,” James smiles, he’s being nice, Regulus knows what he looks like—severe, cold, bare. James steps forward, Regulus having positioned himself at the back wall, across from the door.

“Can I—“

“No.” The word is out of Regulus so fast he can barely believe he’s said it, and instantly James stops. Hands dropping to his sides. He looks like he always does—perfect. Hair a mess, glasses smudged. Perfect.

Inhale. Exhale.

Nothing matters.

“Okay,” James says, clearly trying to recover. This is no doubt not the reunion he thought he was going to be getting. Regulus knows that he’s hurting him. Knows he shouldn’t have come.

James leans against the back of the sofa. “You have a good Christmas?” he asks tentatively.

Regulus wants to laugh. He doesn’t. “Sure, it was fine. Yours?”

It’s hard to concentrate, it’s been hard to concentrate all day. Maybe longer than that. It’s always a bit of a culture shock returning to school after being at Grimmauld Place, but this, this is next level.

You had to hide too much of yourself this time, says the voice in his head. He thinks it’s probably right.

“Reg?”

The last time I saw you I was happy.

“Regulus?”

The last time I saw you my mother was trying to rip you out of my head.

“Regulus?” James repeats his name for a third time, louder now, and afraid. It’s clear that he’s been speaking and Regulus hasn’t heard a word of it.

“Sorry,” the shaking has started and it’s work to keep it out of his voice. “I’m not feeling well.”

He can see how desperately James wants to close the space between them but he doesn’t. Doesn’t take a single step.

“Do you want me to take you to the infirmary?”

“You can’t take me to the infirmary,” because someone might see us, he lets remain unsaid, his voice verging on cruel. He hates it. But he doesn’t stop it.

“No one’s going to see us at this hour.”

Regulus shakes his head. “You don’t know that, besides, I don’t want to go to the infirmary anyway. I just want to go back to my room. I just want to sleep.”

Pain, imperfectly suppressed by James Potter’s beautiful face.

I’ve been in love with you since I was eleven years old, he thinks.

“Okay,” James says eventually. “If that’s what you want.”

Regulus nods, letting them stay in tense silence only a minute longer before he somehow manages to force his legs to move. He doesn’t look at James.

“Reg?”

Part of him doesn’t want to stop. He’s so close, so close to being out of here. So close to being free of the growing ache in his chest. Of the cracking in his bones.

But he does stop, looking behind him to find James unmoved, face broken open.

“I missed you,” he gives him a weak smile and Regulus feels his hand tighten around the doorknob in front of him in an attempt to stay standing.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” is all he says, not waiting to see what effect those words have on James before he throws himself into the hallway.

He just needs to get back to his room. He just needs to close his eyes. He just needs to not be awake for a little bit.

Regulus shoves his hands in his pockets as he moves through the hallways, steps determined, focused.

Inhale. Exhale.

Nothing matters. If nothing matter than nothing hurts.

“Black, fancy seeing you here.”

Regulus’s steps stutter but don’t stop. He knows that voice, knows it without even looking for it.

“Well that’s not very polite,” Severus Snape falls into step beside him.

“Following me now are you?” Regulus demands through clenched teeth, eyes very determinedly forward as he makes a conscious effort to keep his breath at a reasonable pace.

“Actually, I had other business to attend to, but, two birds one stone. This seemed like an excellent opportunity to remind you of that favour you still owe me.”

“I don’t owe you shit,” Regulus growls, too tired for this, too broken for this.

“Ah-ah-ah, I think you’ll find that that’s not true. Unless you want a certain rumour going around...”

Regulus sighs. “Please, enough with the empty threats. You’re not going to tell anyone anything.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure.”

Regulus stops so abruptly that Snape nearly trips over himself trying to do the same. “You want in Snape, huh? You want in on the cause? You want to run around with Mulciber and Avery and call yourself a Death Eater? Then I would watch your fucking mouth around me.”

Snape looks back at him, clearly taken off guard, and Regulus sneers in a way he knows makes him look like his mother.

“You are no one,” Regulus pushes, feeling the anger and the fear and the pain of the last two weeks straining against his skin. “Your mother is no one. Your muggle father is no one. You think that they’ll let you join without the help of people like me?” he laughs and doesn’t recognize the sound of his own voice. “When you have blood thicker than that mudblood you can’t get to fuck you?”

It happens fast.

One minute they’re facing each other and the next Snape has him pressed up against the wall. Whatever was holding Regulus together snaps then. Like a dam it all comes crashing forth, everything he’d been trying to keep controlled, keep buried. And he can’t breathe. He can’t breathe. He tries, he tries but nothing is working.

Inhale.

Inhale.

Come on, inhale.

But he’s eleven years old and Roger Flint is crushing him.

Inhale.

Inhale.

Inhale.

He’s trapped in his bedroom, Lucius Malfoy’s foot on his chest.

Inhale.

Inhale.

Inhale.

He knows that Snape is talking, spitting venom in his face, but Regulus can't hear him. He wonders if anyone has ever died like this before? Because their heart just gave up.

“Oi! Get the fuck off him.”

The second that Snape's grip is pried from his shoulders he collapses, legs unable to support him. But nothing changes. The horrible feelings clawing at his skin, the pain—the pain that hurts so much more now—it doesn't go away.

Inhale.

Inhale.

Inhale.

Bellatrix is in his head. He can't move. He can't blink. His mother is flipping through his memories. His brother is walking out the door.

Inhale.

Inhale.

Inhale.

“What's going on here?”

He is vaguely aware of the third voice. Vaguely aware that something has been going on around him—bodies, spells, feet shuffling on the stone floor.

He's rocking back and forth, nails digging into his knees.

Does he know that this is what you're really like? Lucius asks. A worm? Pathetic and grovelling and used?

Inhale.

Inhale.

Inhale.

He'll figure it out eventually. What a sad little thing you are. And I can't imagine he'll want you after that.

Inhale.

Inhale.

Inhale.

There's talking, voices, he knows there is. Doesn't know what they're saying though. Doesn't think it matters. What can they do to him? What else can they do?

"Regulus?"

James comes into view, kneeling in front of him, hands held out but not touching. He can feel his magic, he can always feel his magic. Sweet and warm, it curls around him but doesn't squeeze. Regulus tries to hold on to that, tries to use it as a rope to pull himself out of whatever hole he's fallen into, but it doesn't work.

"Regulus, I need you to breathe okay?" his eyes are pleading, and it's not until that moment that Regulus realizes that he's been hearing James Potter's voice in his head the whole time.

Inhale. Exhale.

He opens his mouth to speak but he can't, so he just shakes his head. Squeezing his eyes shut.

"Okay, it's okay, you're okay."

And Regulus wonders how he manages to say it without choking.

"So, it turns out my mum knows about Patroclus and Achilles," James goes on, his voice low, calm. Just talking, "don't ask me how, she's a bit mad like that, I'm pretty sure she knows everything honestly. Anyway, I started reading the Iliad, which I thought was going to me a bit more, you know, soppy, but it's mostly a bunch of guys killing each other. Not that I'm complaining."

Something comes out of Regulus that's almost a laugh. He doesn't know if he's crying. He hopes that he's not.

"And like, obviously I'm all for the Greeks, but, I've got to be honest, I kinda like Hector."

Now Regulus actually does laugh, wet and rough as it is. His eyes open and the world is blurry. So he is crying then.

"Of course you like Hector."

And oh how James smiles at that. Slow and soft. "There you are," he almost whispers.

Regulus realizes that it's true. He's shaking and crying and not at all confident that he can stand up but he's breathing again. Thank Merlin he's breathing again.

"Mr. Potter?"

The voice makes Regulus look up, a wave of nausea washing over him as he sees Filch and Snape standing there. Snape's nose bleeding, his shirt collar torn.

“Take Mr. Black to the infirmary and then get back to your dorm,” Filch continues. “I’ll be telling McGonagall and Slughorn all about this, no doubt I’ll see you in detention tomorrow evening.”

“Yes Sir,” James says without hesitating, still crouched on the floor.

“Come on you,” Filch nudges Snape down the hall, Snape whose eyes have not stopped bouncing between James and Regulus. “Go on get!” Filch gives him another push and Snape reluctantly tears his eyes away from them, allowing himself to be nearly dragged in the direction of the Slytherin dorms.

They’re silent at first, listening as the footsteps grow distant down the hall.

“Regulus—“

But he cuts himself off when Regulus reaches forward, tugging on his shirt, pulling him close.

“Woah—hey,” there’s some shuffling, James moving so that his back is against the wall, pulling Regulus into his lap, like a little kid, but he doesn’t care, pressing his face into James’s chest.

“I’m sorry,” he mutters, voice still rough. “I’m sorry.”

“Shh, hey, no, it’s okay Reg, you’re okay.”

And none of that is true but he doesn’t bother trying to correct him. James runs his hand soothingly up and down Regulus’s back, kissing the top of his head. “This okay?” he asks.

And Regulus nods. “We’re in the hallway,” he says stupidly, but James seems to understand. Regulus feels him shuffling underneath him—pulling out his wand he thinks. A few seconds later something is draped over their heads. Regulus blinks, looking up.

“Did you just cover us with a cloak?”

James nods. “Invisibility cloak.”

Regulus stares at him. “You have an invisibility cloak?”

“Surprise?”

Regulus shakes his head, pressing his face back into James’s shirt. “Magic map, invisibility cloak—you’re ridiculous.”

James laughs softly. “So I’ve been told.”

It’s warm in James’s arms, so they stay like that, Regulus unwilling to move, James probably afraid to.

Eventually, Regulus hears himself whisper; “she cut my hair,” he thinks he might be crying again. He doesn’t know why.

James nods. “It’ll grow back,” he presses another kiss to the top of Regulus’s head. “Besides, I told you, I like it. Very badass.”

Regulus half-sniffles half-laughs. “Ridiculous.”

Chapter End Notes

I love this chapter but I'm also nervous about it so hopefully it wasn't too much

I just can't imagine living in that house to be anything but traumatizing honestly, plus I feel like it makes Regulus make more sense as a character

ALSO: I hear you guys with the happy ending, I do, really, buuuuuut, I can't promise you that. This fic is gonna be pretty canon compliant. That being said, I can promise you that they definitely don't hate each other at the end of this and they like, know that, if that makes sense?

Always thank you for comments!

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

James knows he's overprotective. Really, he does. He's not sure why. Not sure where it comes from. He's never lost anyone, never had anyone walk away from him, he hasn't lived through what Sirius has. What Remus has. There's no reason for him to have this deep need to protect when nothing has ever been taken from him. But he does. If you wanted to be cute, and sometimes his mother does, you could call it the Gryffindor in him. But it's more than that. It scares him sometimes, if he's honest. It's too...intense. He feels it about Sirius, about Remus, about Peter. This need to be at their sides. To make sure they're okay. To destroy anything and anyone who tries to touch them. Because they're his. His to protect. His to keep. His to love. It's too much. He knows it is.

It's worse with Regulus.

He doesn't like Snape. Whatever Lily says, he doesn't see much that's redeemable about the kid. But he's glad that Filch showed up when he did, glad that he pulled them apart. Because, for a minute, when he came around that corner, when he saw Snape with Regulus pressed against the wall...he doesn't actually think he was going to kill him. He hopes he wasn't. But merlin he wanted to. He felt the need burn under his skin. He wouldn't have needed magic. Wouldn't have needed a wand. He'd have done it with his bare hands. And that scares him.

Scares him almost as much as the way Regulus shakes in his arms. The way he cries silently into his chest. James has never felt his age quite so much as when he was crouched on the floor, trying to get Regulus to breathe. All he could think was; "I don't know what I'm doing. I don't know what I'm doing. Someone help. Someone get my mum."

It hurts. People hurt. Even when they don't mean to. Even when it isn't their fault. It hurts to see Remus the morning after a full moon, which is a selfish thing to feel, or to think, but it's true. It hurts to see him broken and battered and filled with loneliness. Just like it hurt to watch Regulus fall apart. He knows it isn't about him. None of it is. But it hurts like it's his. And he's sorry. And he wishes he was stronger. Wishes he was more. Wishes he wasn't the only person he knew who wasn't covered in scars.

"We're going to have to move," Regulus says eventually, still pressed against him, invisibility cloak over their heads. James's arms instinctively tighten around him.

"Let's go back to the room. Can we do that?" he realizes he shouldn't be making demands right now. But the idea of letting Regulus go back to that dorm—the idea that Snape might be waiting for him...

"Filch might check—"

"The room?"

“If you went back to your dorm.”

James shakes his head. “I’ve already got one detention, another won’t make much of a difference.”

Regulus is quiet.

“I’m asking Reg,” James says gently, “it’s a question, you can say no. You can always say no.” He knows he handled things wrong, before. Knows he looked disappointed when Regulus turned him away. He’s never been good at guarding his emotions. He hates that he did that. That he made him think—for even a minute—that he had to do anything he didn’t want to.

“I know,” Regulus whispers back, before burrowing further into James’s chest.

His hand goes to the back of his head, holds him there.

I love you.

I love you.

I’m so sorry that I wasn’t there.

I’m so sorry that someone hurt you and I couldn’t stop it.

I’m so sorry that I don’t know what to do.

“Okay,” Regulus says finally. “Okay, lets go.”

“Yeah?” James tries to keep the relief out of his voice.

“Yeah. Yes. Yes James.”

It’s a slow process, getting Regulus back on his feet. James suggests carrying him but Regulus sends him a look so sharp James can’t believe he isn’t bleeding from it. He keeps one hand around Regulus’s waist and the other holding up the invisibility cloak, even though it doesn’t quite cover their feet. He figures some coverage is better than none, and he’s not at all certain that Filch isn’t coming back.

By the time they make it to the room he thinks they’re both exhausted. He tosses the cloak over a nearby chair, Regulus collapsing onto the bed leaving James standing awkwardly by the door. He wants desperately to be closer but knows better than to move. He may not understand where it comes from, Regulus’s fear of hands, and bodies, and touch. But he knows that Regulus hates it, that he’s almost—ashamed of it. And that he’ll let James cross boundaries if he pushes. Clearly it’s something Regulus has grown used to. So James is so, so careful not to push.

“Do you have practice tomorrow morning?” he asks finally.

Regulus shakes his head, still lying on his back. “No. You?”

“Course, Frank’s a complete tyrant.”

“Please, you love it.”

“Maybe,” James admits, feeling shaky even as they fall into familiar patterns, “but I don’t want him to know that.”

“No, I suppose not.”

There’s another pause, the fire burning low, somehow anticipating their level of exhaustion.

“I’ll sleep on the sofa yeah?”

“James—“

He knows that tone. Hears the pain in it. The fear. “It’s alright Reg. I don’t mind. Really.”

Regulus sighs. “Has it ever occurred to you that you should mind? That you should want more? More than—“

“No,” James cuts him off, voice steady. “It hasn’t.”

Regulus lets out another sigh, kicking his shoes off before wiggling so that’s he’s sitting up against the headboard. He looks exhausted, like he hasn’t slept the whole time he’s been gone. There are craters hanging under his eyes, his skin pale, his hands unable to stay still. Constantly fidgeting in his lap or with his sleeve.

“Okay, the sofa, but can you come here first?” he looks nervous when he says it.

When James had walked in here the first time, it had been hard not to react to the boy in front of him. Regulus had been swaying against the back wall, eyes barely able to focus, body held so tightly James was afraid he was going to snap. At least now he’s present. But it’s—it’s all laced with a new kind of fear. One that’s closer to the surface.

“Sure Reg,” he sits on the side of the bed, leaving space between them. After a few moments Regulus reaches out, playing with James’s fingers, slowly, carefully. James doesn’t move.

“What happened,” Regulus says finally, not looking up from their hands, “with Snape? I wasn’t really...I didn’t really see.”

James blinks, surprised by the question, really feeling that he ought to be the one asking. “I heard you two arguing—or, well, I heard Snape anyway, he wasn’t exactly keeping his voice down. So I followed the noise and when I found you he—he had you pinned against the wall,” Regulus’s hand stills, and James feels the anger fresh again, the desire to rip Snape to shreds.

“So I pulled him off you and he took a swing at me,” Regulus looks up at that, squinting.

“He hit you?”

James snorts. "Not very well, Snivellus has never excelled at physical altercations."

"You would know I guess."

"Mm," James nods noncommittally. "Anyway, I hit him back, somewhat more effectively."

"I noticed," and James thinks he catches the hint of a smile in Regulus's mouth.

"Mostly we just shoved each other around a bit, he shot off a spell at some point but it missed by a mile."

Regulus doesn't respond right away, still playing with James's fingers. "I think he knows," he says eventually.

James raises his eyebrow. "Knows?"

"About...us."

"Is that why you two got into it?"

Regulus forces a breath out of his nose. "No. No, that was...well, anyway. The way he was looking at us, when Filch dragged him off, I think he knows."

"I don't know, it's not like we were snogging or anything."

"We weren't behaving...platonically."

James makes a scoffing noise. "I mean, we could have been, I'd have helped any of my friends out the same."

Grey eyes look up, tired. "But we're not friends."

James doesn't have an answer for that. Doesn't even know where to start.

Eventually Regulus sighs, pulling his hand back into his own lap. "I'm just warning you, because if I were Snape, the first person I would go to would be Sirius." James doesn't miss the way his voice frays on his brother's name.

He still doesn't know what the right thing to say here is. What it is that Regulus wants to hear. "It'll be his word against ours, he hasn't got any way to prove it."

Regulus leans back against the headboard, breathing in and out in that way he does sometimes, like he has to think about it. "Since when do you need proof to spread a rumour at this school?" and before James can answer he goes on; "Besides, that's why he'll go to Sirius. He won't need to prove it, he'll just need to make Sirius doubt you. Which he will."

James hates this conversation. "Will he?" a bit defiantly.

Regulus rolls his head sleepily towards him, eyes opening again. "Yes, it's what we do. Doubt and doubt and doubt. Everything gets all twisted in that house, love and hate and all

the rest. You can't trust anyone. Can't even trust yourself."

James aches for the both of them. He wishes that he could fix it, that he could stop them from ever being hurt at all. "He trusts me," James says finally, voice weak.

Regulus nods. "And you're lying to him."

James feels the air escape from his lungs, like he's just been hit. He's not entirely sure he hasn't been. He makes to stand up but Regulus's hand shoots out, wrapping around his wrist. Sleepy eyes suddenly wide.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I don't know why I said that. I'm not—" he fumbles with his words. "I'm not very good right now, I'm all—all the worst parts of me. I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

James breathes in, trying to put out the fires those words started in his chest. Because he hadn't thought about it like that. Not really, not fully. He knows that he is one of the few people that Sirius trusts—that he's ever trusted. But it never occurred to him before that he wasn't worthy of it.

Regulus is still staring at him with frightened eyes.

"It's okay Reg."

"It's not."

"It was just the truth."

But the younger boy shakes his head. "I was being cruel. I told you I'm—I'm not very nice. I try to be—for you," he grimaces at the confession. "I'm the one who made you promise not to tell anyone, it isn't fair for me to throw it back in your face."

"Regulus," he says softly, holding the other boy's eyes. "You don't have to be nice all the time you know, nobody is."

Regulus looks at him skeptically. "Says you."

"I'll have you know there are plenty of people who think I'm an asshole."

This doesn't seem to sway Regulus. "They think you're an idiot. There's a difference."

James laughs, probably too loud, but it melts some of the ice in Regulus's eyes so he doesn't feel too bad about it. "You might be right."

"I am," Regulus looks down at where he's still holding on to James's wrist, and then, slowly, and almost painfully sweet, he brings James's knuckles to his mouth and kisses them. It's soft and quick, like something he wanted so badly he couldn't help it. His cheeks are slightly pink when he puts James's hand back down again. James wonders how it is that Regulus can be so forward about so much else and so unsure of the littler things like this?

"I should let you sleep," he says eventually, breathless, heart trying to slip between his ribs.

There are so many words crowding behind Regulus's lips, he can see them, see Regulus swallow them down. He wishes, that just once, he wouldn't. That just once he would tell James all the things he thinks are too terrible to utter. The parts of him too ugly to show. I can take it, James wants to say, trust me.

"Thank you," Regulus says finally, voice quiet.

"For what?"

The younger boy shakes his head. "All of it. Everything."

They watch one another for too long before James eventually gets to his feet. He reaches his hand out, slowly, pausing before they touch, "Can I?"

There's a moment of hesitation before Regulus nods; "yes," he says softly.

James holds his face, thumbs brushing over his cheeks as Regulus closes his eyes, leaning into the touch. James bends forward and presses a kiss to the top of his head before pulling away.

"I'm not going anywhere Regulus."

The younger boy blinks his eyes open, so serious and stoic. "I know," he says, though the pause gives him away.

"I mean it."

Regulus looks almost sad for a minute, before he's able to wipe his expression clean, neutral. "I know you do."

He considers pushing the matter but decides against it, not tonight. "Goodnight Reg."

"Goodnight James."

James is slightly better at sneaking back into his dorm, using the invisibility cloak to make sure he gets upstairs unseen. Unfortunately, Sirius is already awake for quidditch, and there isn't really a subtle way for James to just...appear.

Sirius doesn't seem surprised when James takes off the invisibility cloak, he just gives him a cold once over from where he's sitting on his bed.

"I—" James tries to explain.

"Better hurry up," Sirius gets to his feet, grabbing his broom, "don't want to keep Frank waiting."

With that he brushes passed him and out of the room, shutting the door a bit too forcefully considering their other two roommates are still sleeping.

Sirius gives James the silent treatment for the rest of the morning, which James thinks is a little unfair but he tries to ignore it. All he gets is glowering and grumbling and sarcastic huffs every time he opens his mouth. By the end of breakfast he's about ready to throttle Sirius. Luckily Remus, being the perceptive lad he is, makes sure to sit between them in charms and then again in potions. By lunch things are actually starting to feel a little more relaxed. That is, until James hears the unmistakable sound of McGonagall clearing her throat.

"Professor," he says, resigned. Putting down his sandwich and turning towards her.

"Really Potter, fighting in the corridor in the middle of the night?"

James can feel the eyes of each of his friends boring into him, Sirius's especially.

"What on earth possessed you to act so foolishly?" After an extended silence James realizes that she actually expects an answer from him.

"Oh—er—I was sleep walking?"

She arches a formidable eyebrow. "Really? And you just happened to sleepwalk right into Mr. Snape?"

James rubs the back of his neck. "Yeah, mad coincidence that."

"Mmhm," she says, eyes running him up and down, clearly unimpressed. "A weeks detentions—"

"Oh come on—"

"—and ten points from Gryffindor."

"Professor, you know Slughorn's not going to take anything from Slytherin for this!"

She sniffs. "How my fellow professors deal with their houses is none of my business, you, Mr. Potter, ought to know better. You're in fifth year for goodness sakes."

James doesn't understand how that's relevant to anything but he can't see the point in trying to fight with her.

"You're detention starts tonight, after supper, six-thirty. Filch will be waiting for you in the trophy room, you are to be punctual and contrite, have I made myself clear?"

"Yes, Professor," he grumbles, turning back to his sandwich.

"Oh, and Mr. Potter?"

He looks up as she calls to him over her shoulder.

"If this happens again I promise you the consequences will be far more severe."

James rolls his eyes—though only once he's certain she's no longer looking. "Brilliant."

It takes him a minute to realize that the other three marauders are all still staring at him and he tries to figure out if there's anyway he can avoid having the conversation that is clearly coming.

"You got into a fight with Snape?" Remus hisses.

Apparently not.

James looks guiltily up at the confused faces of his friends—well, Remus and Peter look confused. Sirius looks angry.

"Sort of," he answers eventually. "Yeah."

"Sort of?" Peter repeats.

James shrugs. "Don't know why you're acting like this is some big deal, we get into scrapes with Snivellus all the time."

"Not usually in the middle of the night," Remus says, not unfairly.

"Yeah well, what can I say, the bloke's a tool 24/7, no rest for the wicked eh?" he tries to smile but doesn't appear to appease a single one of his friends.

"What the hell were you even doing out of bed?" Peter asks, looking the most genuinely confused out of the bunch.

James shrugs again, looking down at his plate. "Walking."

That earns him a cold laugh from Sirius, who pushes away from the table muttering something that sounds a lot like "unbelievable" under his breath.

"Pads?" Remus calls after him, but Sirius is already walking away, without a backwards glance. James watches him.

"He must have forgotten something in the room," Remus says, eyeing James nervously.

James stares for a moment longer before dropping his eyes. "Yeah. Must have."

Sirius's mood continues for the rest of the day and it's for that reason that instead of going back to the dorms after class James decides to go to the library. Maybe giving him some space will help. Besides, if he has to listen to Sirius sigh one more time he's going to lose it.

Marlene and Lily are already there, Remus having promised to be along later after grabbing some books from upstairs. James stewes over his coursework. Not really paying attention to anything he's reading, mind preoccupied with the Black brothers.

He wonders how Regulus is getting on—he didn't see him at breakfast and Regulus was still asleep when James left this morning. He wasn't sure if he should wake him up or not but

decided against it—if anyone needs an extra hour or two of shut-eye it's Reg.

Sirius is a whole other problem. It's clear that James can't keep shutting him out like this. Sirius won't stand for it and even though he's being a complete wanker at the moment James knows it's fair. Knows he'd probably be just as bad. But what other option does he have?

“Oi! Earth to Potter?” Lily snaps her fingers in front of his face, pulling him out of his thoughts.

“Damn Evans, we're in a library, tone it down a bit.”

She blinks back at him, then elbows Marlene beside her. “Mar, did you hear that?”

Marlene, who is still scribbling out her potions essay, nods. “Sure did.”

Lily turns back to him, biting her lips to hold in a smile.

“I don't understand what's so funny here,” he looks between the two girls, not at all in the mood for mind games.

“You just told me to tone it down,” Lily says, as though that ought to make everything clear.

“Er—yeah?”

“You,” she repeats, openly smiling now. “You James Potter, king of the loud-over-the-top-wankers—“

“Oi, okay, I'm not that bad.”

“—you just told ME to tone it down.”

He gives her a flat look. “You're enjoying this way too much Evans.”

“Pretty sure I'm enjoying it the exact right amount.”

He snorts, shaking his head as he looks back down at his textbook.

“That must be some page there,” Lily goes on, still smiling. He'd be more annoyed if it wasn't so fucking charming.

“What are you on about now?”

She nods down at the page in front of him. “Just that you've been reading that same section for the past thirty minutes.”

He blinks, looks down at the page, and then back up again. “Maybe I'm just a very slow reader, ever consider that?”

“Please, I've seen you read a dozen times James.”

He grins out of the corner of his mouth. “You been watching me Evans?”

She rolls her eyes, but he's pleased to see pink stains on the tops of her cheeks. "We've been in school together for five years, I've seen you read."

"A likely story."

"So," she goes on, ignoring him, "what is it that's got you so preoccupied you can't get through a single paragraph?"

He meets her green eyes across the table and thinks, not for the first time, that this lying business is really rather exhausting and he has no idea how the Slytherins manage it.

"I don't know," he sighs, running a hand through his hair.

She sends him a pointed look that makes clear that that will not be enough for her, so he decides to give-in a little: "Sirius is upset with me."

"Oh no, trouble in paradise?"

He doesn't particularly appreciate her joking tone. "Yeah, a bit."

She leans forward across the table, expression becoming slightly more sincere. "Did you have a fight?"

And how does he even answer that? "Merlin, maybe, I can't tell."

She arches her brow. "I'm sorry, you can't tell?"

Marlene snorts beside her. "Boys," she says disparagingly.

"Hey, it's complicated, okay?"

"Somehow I doubt that," Marlene doesn't even bother to look up from her coursework.

"Mar, stop antagonizing him," Lily elbows her again, holding back a smirk. "Go on Potter, you don't know if you and your best mate have had a fight?"

"Well, we did have a fight," he tries to explain, not at all sure why he's bothering. "But we were fine afterwards."

"You made up?" she asks.

"What? No. We just pretended it never happened."

She blinks slowly. "Ah, I see, you were," she makes air quotes with her fingers, "fine."

"Honestly, you lot are way less sympathetic than I thought you would be." James crosses his arms over his chest and slouches in his seat.

"Sorry, sorry," she shakes out her shoulders. "Sympathetic Lily, in the house. So, you ignored all your feelings, dealt with nothing, and now it's coming back to bite you in the ass?"

James glares at her across the table. “That didn’t sound very sympathetic.”

“Didn’t it?” she asks innocently, and when he continues to pout she sighs; “Listen, here’s what it comes down to, did you do something wrong?”

James’s stomach squirms. “Yeah,” he says reluctantly.

“So apologize.”

“Oh brilliant advice that.”

“Well,” she looks at him expectantly, “have you tried it?”

James grinds his teeth. “No,” he forces out eventually.

“You might want to.”

He sighs, running a hand over his face. “It’s not that simple—he doesn’t want an apology, he wants me to—to fix it,” which is as close to the truth as James is going to get.

Lily looks at him, eyes searching his face for a moment before she speaks again. “And you… can’t? Don’t want to?”

James lets out a breath. “I’m scared more like.” Okay, THAT’s as close to the truth as James is going to get.

She nods slowly. “Well, have you tried telling him that?”

He opens his mouth, finds he has nothing to say, and closes it again. That hadn’t actually occurred to him. After a few moments of watching him flounder Lily leans forward again, placing her hand on his arm which feels…weird. Nice but…weird.

“Listen, I’m not saying I’m an expert or anything, but I’m pretty sure even the giant squid knows how much Sirius Black loves you. So, whatever you did, I bet you anything that he wants to forgive you more than he wants to be angry with you. Besides,” she pulls back, “it’s a bit sad, one of you without the other, you’re really better as a pair.”

James snorts. “I’m going to try not to take that as an insult.”

“Good, it wasn’t meant as one.”

He nods, scrubbing at his face before meeting her gaze again. “You’re right. I know you are. I’m bloody miserable without the wanker.”

She smiles, a little more softly than he would have expected.

“What?”

“Nothing,” she shakes her head, still smiling, “just, it’s sweet is all.”

James pulls a face that makes her laugh.

“I’m just saying, however annoying you lot are—minus Remus of course.”

“Of course,” James agrees. “I’ve always said Remus is my best quality.”

She smirks. “However annoying,” she continues, “the way you look after each other, it’s always been...I don’t know, the most human thing about you.”

“Human?” James asks. “You thought I was inhuman?”

“Sometimes, there were a few years there where you felt more like a cartoon character than a person, all those bloody proposals.”

James grimaces. “Oh yeah, those.”

“Mm, those.”

He rubs the back of his neck, fidgeting uncomfortably. “Suppose I owe you an apology for some of them.”

She arches her brow, “are you sure you don’t want to just act like they never happened?” her voice is dripping in sarcasm.

Marlene snorts. “As if any of us could ever forget.”

James glares at her even though she’s not looking up to see it. “Thanks Mar, big help you are.”

“Anytime Potter.”

James exhales, turning back to Lily who watches him expectantly.

He coughs, clearing his throat. “Well...for what it’s worth, I am sorry. About most of them.”

“Most?” she repeats.

“Well, not the first one.”

She arches her brow. “But the rest of them?”

He shrugs. “It kinda became expected didn’t it? Couldn’t let my audience down.”

He sees the familiar expression of anger pinching her face and when she speaks again her voice is brittle. “And what about me then?”

James ducks his head sheepishly. “Yeah, I know, it wasn’t—wasn’t fair. You got lost a bit, ironically, in the...show of it. It just, it took me a while to figure that out. That I’d stopped doing it for you. Stopped thinking about you at all really.”

He expects her to get angry but she doesn’t. Just watches him. He feels uncomfortable but he does his best to bear it, to let her get out whatever it is that she needs to. If not yelling, he at

least expects a dressing down, Lily is rather famously good at those. But the next words out of her mouth are not what he expects.

“But the first one,” she says slowly, “you thought about me then?”

“Yeah,” and he doesn’t know why that feels important but it does. “You were all I thought about really.”

There’s a moment of silence then, both of them looking at each other, for the first time with the past laid out in front of them. Eventually James can’t take it anymore.

“Well,” he says, suddenly feeling antsy, “better get back to…” he gestures to the book in front him.

“Right,” Lily seems to shake herself awake. “Right, yeah.”

He tries to concentrate. Really. But he never does get passed that page.

James is not new to detention. In fact, he’s rather old hat at it. Usually it involves cleaning, on occasion, when McGonagall is feeling particularly spiteful, it also includes essay writing. Something about making him think about his actions and consider the consequences blah blah blah. Honestly, all things considered, dusting and polishing old trophies is one of the better options. So James is feeling in relatively good spirits as he strolls up to the dusty room in the east wing of the dungeons. That is, until he remembers who he’s gotten himself in trouble with.

“Oh fuck,” he mutters under his breath as Snape skulks down the corridor towards them. James turns to the caretaker.

“I would rather you hang me from the ceiling by my toes than spend the next three hours with that tosser.”

Filch seems almost wistful. “If only my boy, if only.” He pulls out a set of jangly keys from his pocket and unlocks the door, whispering something about ministry guidelines and “a little bit of torture never hurt anyone” which, James doesn’t think is strictly true. He follows Filch into the room very pointedly not looking at Snape who has come up behind him.

The door has barely closed before James has a rag and spray bottle thrown in his face. He decides to let it go however, because Filch does the same thing to Snape who makes an affronted squeaky noise that James wishes he had recorded.

“You,” Filch points at James, “start at that end, and you,” he turns to Snape, “that one,” he gestures to the opposite end of the long, slender room, which is made up almost entirely of shelves. What all these trophies are for James hasn’t the foggiest. He’s done this once or twice before, a lot of them are quidditch, some are for academics or sports that James has never heard of and clearly went out of fashion centuries ago. Some are inscribed in latin so honestly it’s anyone’s guess.

“Wands,” Filch holds out his hand.

“Wands!” Snape demands indignantly.

James just rolls his eyes, pulling his out of his pocket and handing it over.

“There’s no magic allowed in detention,” Filch says with a leer, motioning to Snape with his fingers. “Now, hand it over.”

Snape scowls back at the man, seemingly trying to decide whether or not he actually has to listen to him. James sighs, leaning against the shelves behind him. It’s a rookie move honestly, getting Filch riled up.

“Do you want want me to be fetching McGonagall, telling her you aren’t complying huh?”

If anything, Snape’s scowl seems to deepen. “She’s not my head of house.”

“Didn’t say she was.”

James snorts and then quickly tries to cover it with a cough as Filch looks over at him suspiciously. There’s no getting on the caretakers good side, there’s only staying off of his bad side, and James has always managed that balancing act rather well.

Eventually, with a dramatic sigh, Snape hands over his wand.

“Alright then, you lot get to work, I’ll be back in an hour to check on your progress.”

“You’re just going to leave us?” Snape demands outraged.

Filch smiles. “Don’t worry, you needn’t be afraid, Mrs. Norris will be here to watch you, won’t you sweetheart?”

There’s the sound of purring before the feline emerges from between a stack of trophies on the floor, winding her way around the caretakers legs. James does his best to repress a shiver. He’s always hated that cat.

“Now, if you wanna get out of here before midnight I’d suggest you start polishing.”

James kicks himself upright, happy to put some distance between himself and Snape as he walks down to the other end of the room. He polishes a few trophies the muggle way, keeping an eye on Mrs. Norris and the back of Snape’s head. But once he’s certain that neither of them can see him, he slides Peter’s wand out of his sleeve. This isn’t James’s first rodeo, and he absolutely refuses to be stuck in this miserable room all night.

With the quick flick of the wand the trophies closest to him start to sparkle, and James smiles.

“My, my Potter, aren’t you quick,” Filch mutters an hour latter when James has nearly half the room done without breaking a sweat.

“Lots of practice sir,” he smiles. Filch does not smile back, his sneering gaze moving over to Snape, whose normally grey face is flushed and sweaty and made even uglier by the intense anger James can see bubbling beneath it.

“You on the other hand,” Filch looks at Snape’s pitiful pile of polished trophies. James reckons he could do twice that many even if he wasn’t cheating. “Pick up the pace boy. I’ll be back again in an hour and I expect you to have more done than that,” he all but spits on the floor next to him. There is little that bothers Filch quite as much as poor housekeeping.

He gives Mrs. Norris a scratch on the head before trudging out of the room.

James turns back to the shelves behind him. Unfortunately, now that he’s no longer hidden away in his corner he’ll have to start doing them by hand. Still, he’s managed to make an impressive dent if he does say so himself.

“How the hell did you get through those so fast?” demands an irate Snape from beside him

James lets out a long suffering sigh. He is also now, unfortunately, much closer to his detention partner.

“Listen Snivellus,” he looks over at Snape, whose rag is curled in his fist as though it has personally offended him, “it’s not my fault that you’re crap at everything.”

Snape lets out an indignant noise, like a tea kettle that’s just come to boil, and James can’t help but laugh, bending down to pick up his next trophy. ‘Prefect of the Year’ is scrawled across it and James has half a mind to nick it for Remus.

“Never would have pegged you for a queer Potter,” he hears the words come out of Snape’s mouth in a hiss and feels himself pause.

It’s the first time anyone’s ever called him that and he expected to feel...more. More about the disgust in Snape’s tone. But maybe it’s because it’s Snape—pathetic and grasping as he is—that makes it almost laughable instead.

He looks over at the other boy, expression flat. “Sorry? Did you say something? You’ll have to speak up, I’m not fluent in asshole.”

Snape’s eyes narrow. “Tell me Potter, does your friend know you’re fucking his brother?”

“Do you know that I’m fucking his brother?” James asks, feeling the weight of Peter’s wand up his sleeve and struggling to find the willpower not to use it. “Because I don’t actually think you do, that’s just the baseless conclusion that you’ve drawn in that tiny little brain of yours. So, if you don’t mind, I’d like to get back to polishing so that I can get the hell out of here.”

Snape opens his mouth to speak but James cuts him off.

“Great. Glad we’re on the same page.”

He very purposefully turns away from him, scrubbing rather unfairly at the trophy in his hands. A few moments of silence pass and James starts to think that he might actually be able to get through the rest of this night without having to speak to Snape again. Of course, Snape has other plans.

“That’s the second time you’ve come to his rescue,” he says.

“Good to know you can count,” James does not look up from his cleaning.

“Bit hypocritical of you, don’t you think?”

James hates that he can feel himself taking the bait, responding to the infuriatingly smug tone Snape’s voice has taken on.

“What ever are you talking about Severus?” he asks, forcing a brevity into his words that he does not feel.

“James Potter, defender of half bloods and muggle borns, protecting Regulus Black? Hardly adds up does it?”

James grits his teeth. “Shockingly, I don’t really care what you think adds up.”

“I bet I’m not the only one who would have a problem with it, even if you aren’t fucking him.”

James very determinedly picks up another trophy, hoping Snape doesn’t notice the way his hands shake with the barely refrained desire to punch him in his stupid mouth.

“People like Lily, for example.”

As someone who quite enjoys antagonizing people, James can recognize a trap when he sees one. And this one is oh so transparent. Unfortunately, that doesn’t stop him from walking right into it. You just can’t help yourself can you? says the voice in his head that sounds strangely like his mother.

“Oh because you know Lily so well.”

“I do.”

James snorts. “Really, cause from what I hear, you two aren’t so close anymore. And I don’t know if you’ve noticed, Snivellus, but now at meals, she seats with me.”

Snape’s mouth forms a firm line and James is about to confidently turn back to his cleaning when:

“Did he tell you, why we were fighting?”

That makes James pause, because, of course, he didn’t. Which isn’t unusual for Regulus. For every word he says James knows there are a dozen he doesn’t. Still, he can’t quite bring himself to admit that to Snape, who seems to understand it anyway, smiling again.

“He called her a mudblood.”

He says it so casually, that at first James doesn't quite understand it. Can't take it in.

“What?” he asks unwillingly. He doesn't want to play this game anymore.

“See?” Snape sneers. “Hypocrite.”

James throws the trophy in his hand to the side, causing it to crash into the pile behind him. “Let me get this straight,” he says, the anger now clearly humming under his words. “He just walked up to you in the middle of the night and went ‘oh, hey Severus, you know that Lily Evans? She’s a—“ his voice cuts out, unable to finish that sentence. “I’m supposed to believe that?”

Snape is clearly enjoying this.

“No. There was a bit more to it than that, though I don't think you'd have liked any of the rest of it much better. A lot of boasting about his family and blood status. If memory serves, you've done worse than shove people into walls for that kind of thing.”

James has a rotting feeling growing in the pit of his stomach. Because Snape is right. And God does he hate it.

“And you were? What? Standing up for muggle-wizard equality?” James asks coldly, doing his best to hide the tremor in his voice.

Snape runs him up and down with his beady little eyes. “Well, you certainly weren't.”

“Fuck you.” He wants to be able to say that he can't picture it. But the terrible truth, is he thinks that Reg might—might say those things—if he was pushed, if he was angry. The rotting feeling grows.

“So which is it Potter?” Snape asks with a sneer. “Which side are you on?”

“Well I'm sure as fuck not on your's.”

Snape's black eyes glint viciously in the candlelight. “Are you sure about that? Because I can promise you that Regulus certainly is.”

James is already in the Come and Go Room when Regulus gets there. He came right from detention. He sits at the end of the bed, elbows on his knees, hands clasped between them. He doesn't look up when Regulus comes in. Doesn't quite know how to handle himself.

“Oh,” he hears Regulus stop. “You're ... early?”

“Yup.”

He doesn't want to be angry with Regulus. He doesn't want to believe Snape. He decides that if Regulus denies it he'll let it go. He'll trust him. Because he does, doesn't he? Trust him?

"James?" Regulus asks cautiously, still standing by the door. And James knows he's let the silence stretch on too long.

With a sigh he lifts his head, looking at Regulus and feeling the breath catch in his chest.

I love you.

I love you.

I love you.

He swallows with difficulty.

"Did you call Lily a mudblood?" he usually avoids the word, but he doesn't want there to be any ambiguity here.

Regulus blinks, surprised and then—nothing. A mask. Empty eyes stare back at him. He hates it.

"Yes," there's no inflection in his voice and James feels something icy drip down his spine.

"Why?" he practically whispers.

Regulus looks back at him like he doesn't understand the question. "Because she is one," he says simply.

"What?"

"Unless I'm mistaken she—"

"She's muggleborn," James interrupts, maybe more sharply than he means to, or maybe just as sharply as he means to, he can't decide.

Regulus stares at him silently for a beat too long. "I'm sorry, I don't see the difference."

"You—" James's voice fails and all he can do is gape at the boy in front of him. It's several moments before he seems to find himself again. "You don't see the difference?" he repeats, and when he gets no response he runs a hand over his face.

"Reg, are you kidding me?"

"They both mean the same thing—"

"Bullshit," he's never raised his voice with Regulus before, and he sees the impact instantly. Sees Regulus's walls go up. See his eyes grow hard. "That's bullshit Regulus and you know it."

Once again Regulus doesn't respond, standing there stiffly in the middle of the room.

“One of them is describing someone whose family doesn’t have magic,” James tries again, a little desperate now. “The other is attacking them. Those two things are not the same.”

Still nothing.

“Reg?” he gets to his feet but doesn’t move, just—just trying to get some sort of response. “Is any of this getting through to you?”

He sees Regulus’s jaw clench, sees the struggle going on in his grey eyes. He just wishes he knew what it was about.

“I understand your words,” he says carefully. “It’s the sentiment I’m struggling with.”

“The sentiment?” James repeats, uneasily.

He can see Regulus’s frustration before he hears it, though whether it’s directed at James or himself James can’t tell. “They don’t...have...magic. They will never be us, be what we can be.”

James opens and closes his mouth several times before he manages to get something out. “So what?”

Regulus’s eyes narrow. “So what?” he repeats almost mockingly.

“What makes you think that we’re the only thing worth being? Or even the best thing? Look at—look at this Reg!” he points up at the ceiling. “You love this, this painting, this story, a wizard didn’t come up with any of that. But when this room tried to give you the things you needed most that’s what it chose—something muggle.”

Regulus has his eyes on the painting, it looks like he’s concentrating, trying to puzzle something out. James knows that this is what he’s like, that he goes quiet, that he needs to take his time with things. James has to be patient. But right now it feels as though his anxiety is going to break through his skin. He’d never thought—really thought—that Reg believed any of this. He was trapped in that house, trapped in Slytherin but he wasn’t—he wasn’t one of them. Not really. Not his Reg. And right now James just needs him to prove it. Needs it desperately. Because he can already feel the cracks in his heart and he isn’t sure he can handle more.

“I never really thought of it like that,” Regulus says finally, slowly, “it’s just always seemed magical to me,” he shakes his head, eyes dropping back down. “That sounds stupid I’m sure.”

“No,” James thinks of that awe and wonder that has nothing to do with spells. “Who says wizards are the only ones with magic?”

Regulus looks away from James and then back again, like he can’t quite hold his gaze. “I don’t know how to see the world the way you do. It’s—no one’s ever said anything like that to me. Or around me. If they had my mother probably would have dismembered them.”

James isn’t sure how much of that is a joke.

“But you still snuck out to those muggle museums,” he prods gently.

Regulus nods “I didn’t really think about it at the time, I just...wanted to.”

That’s enough, James thinks, we can work with that.

“Reg, I get it, I do, but you need to—you can’t—you can’t go using that word, okay? You can’t go around calling people—because if you do then—“ another sentence he can’t finish. “I just need you to promise okay?” James is losing the threads of his thoughts, all the things he knows need to be said but that he doesn’t know how to say.

Regulus nods again, warily. “Okay, if that’s what you want.”

Which isn’t exactly the enthusiastic response James was looking for but he’ll take it. For now.

“Promise?”

“I promise James,” grey eyes unwavering. And James trusts him.

He trusts him.

He trusts him.

Doesn’t he?

He exhales a breath he wasn’t aware he was holding, before extending his hand—a question.

Regulus looks at it for a minute before walking forward, slotting his fingers between James’s and allowing himself to be pulled in.

“Okay,” James murmurs, resting his chin on Regulus’s head. “Okay.”

The boy is warm and soft in his arms and it makes James’s bones ache. It frightens him, how much he feels about Regulus. And he finds himself wondering, for the first time, if maybe it’s wrong.

Chapter End Notes

Two things:

1) Okay, I don't want anyone selling organs - or babies - so I have come up with an epilogue that I actually really like and will end this story on a relatively nice-ish sweet-ish but still canon compliant-ish note. How, you may ask? I guess you'll have to find out.

2) I also want to make clear that like when I say "canon compliant" I don't mean that I'm all the sudden gonna turn this into a Jily fic, like Jily is going to happen, but the focus is

always going to be on James and Regulus

I don't know if this chapter actually feels slow or if that's just me, but I promise that it was necessary set up and the next two chapters there's a lot more action/drama

It's really super fun and nice that you guys are so invested in these characters and what happens to them and I love reading your opinions so forever thank you!

Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

French translations will be in the end notes!

TW Referenced mass acts of violence (I'm so sorry idk how to tw this)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Dear James,

I will try to refrain from nagging you too much about your horrendously sparse letters lately, but let me just remind you that I literally birthed you from my body, so you could perhaps put in a bit more effort darling.

I enclosed the jumper you asked for (it was curled in a heap under your bed of course), tell me, does Remus let you boys get away with such poor cleanliness in his room? Should I write him for tips?

In any case, your father and I were both thrilled to hear about your win against Hufflepuff, he's thinking about coming down for your next match so you'll have to let me know if that's an idea you'd like me to get out of his head. I know how very uncool having your parents doting on you can be (I should let you know, he has gotten his old school scarf and Gryffindor jumper—yes, the one with the roaring lion on the front—ready to go just for the occasion). He's working quite a lot these days, I think he just wants something to look forward to. Not that I'm trying to guilt you into letting us come or anything (I too may have pulled my Gryffindor apparel from the basement, but that is purely a coincidence).

Your cousin Daphne is having a baby, I can tell you're already pretending you don't know who she is but I promise you you've been introduced to her on several occasions. I'll be heading to Diagon Alley to pick out a present and I was thinking I'd get some new trainers for you and Sirius, you two were both looking ratty over Christmas. So you can be expecting those in the near future.

You see James Potter, this is a letter, look at all those words. Don't you feel so much better informed now? I can feel our mother-son relationship strengthening with each sentence (be warned, if you reply to me with four sentences or less your father and I will be showing up to your quidditch game in matching lion jumpers whether you want us to or not).

Give my love to Sirius and the boys!

Sincerely,
your gracious, youthful, incredible mother

Mum,

Please. I'm begging you. Anything but the lion jumper. ANYTHING. You can come, sure, but be a little more chill about it okay? Like maybe wear a trench coat, some hats, sunglasses—I'm just throwing out ideas here!

Listen, it's not my fault my life is dull. I'm doing alright in classes, Frank has us practicing twice a day at this point, the tyrant, but that's hardly new. Mostly everything is the same as it always is. Also, my room is not that messy. Me and Sirius are incredibly well kept young gentlemen I'll have you know. Well, I am anyway. And Remus is not the boss of us!!! (but please don't tell him I said that)

Have they got dad working on the dark mark case? Is that why he's so busy? Bloody mad that was, how it just appeared like that in the middle of London. Do you know anymore about what happened? Have they caught who did it?

See look, loads of words!

Sincerely,

the best son ever, James

A month after they get back from Christmas holidays the image of a skull eating a snake is projected into the sky over downtown London. Clearly magical. Clearly in violation of just about every line of the Statute of Secrecy. The Aurors have to oblivate a ton of muggles and spread a fake news story about how it was promotion for some film or something. No one knows where it came from or what it means, and the Ministry has been infuriatingly tightlipped. Of course, there are rumours that it's connected to the Death Eaters, but they've never done anything like this before. Anything this big.

"Bullshit," Sirius mutters, crumpling up the Daily Prophet in his hands before incendio-ing it.

"Oi!" Peter tries to lean away, "you're getting ash in my eggs," he says, mouth full.

"Nothing again?" James asks, not bothering to look up.

"What the hell are they playing at?" Sirius demands indignantly, fist slamming down on the table so hard the cutlery rattles. "How can they say nothing? How can they KNOW nothing? It's been months at this point. I mean, don't we deserve some kind of, I don't know, fucking explanation?"

It's strange for James, to see the differences between Sirius and Regulus. When they first heard about the mark Sirius got loud and angry and reckless—there have been a lot of scuffles in the corridors. Not that James is in any position to criticize, he's been getting into a fair few fights of his own recently. But Reg? Reg got quiet. There were a few nights where they just lay next to each other, not touching, not talking. It should have been boring,

frustrating, but it wasn't. It was nice to have him there, at James's side, even if he couldn't explain to James what he was feeling, even if he needed to disappear for a bit. Things are better now, but the same way that Sirius's anger lingers just under his skin, so does Reg's silence.

"They're hiding something," Remus speaks up, drawing James's attention across the table.

"You think someone in the Ministry had something to do with it?" James asks, feeling a bit uneasy about that, seeing as his dad is part of the Ministry.

Remus just shrugs. "I think they fucked up, and now they're trying to fix it before they have to admit to it."

"Well they're doing a shit job," Sirius growls. "How hard can it be to find them? I mean they were casting in the middle of London, someone had to have seen them!"

"Maybe they have found them and they just don't want to release their names to the public," Remus says, pushing the food around on his plate.

"No," James says sternly, "they wouldn't do that, no way."

"I'm just saying, the Death Eaters have a lot of sympathizers within the Ministry."

"What are you talking about?" James doesn't know why this feels like a personal attack but for some reason it does. "The Minister of Magic has come out a dozen times renouncing them, he put more dementors on Azkaban to make sure the prisoners were secure—the Ministry does not support these assholes."

Remus sighs, looking up from his plate. "You know I'm not talking about your dad, right?"

"Well I don't know how you could not be," James says defensively.

"I'm just saying," he goes on, sounding a bit exasperated, "that I don't think we can trust everything the Ministry tells us."

"I'm with Moony," Sirius pipes up, and James turns to him with a look of betrayal on his face.

"I'm not talking about Fleamont, obviously," Sirius goes on. "But my dad worked for the Ministry too, and my cousins' awful husbands are working there now. The way I reckon it, the good guys are outnumbered."

James officially hates this conversation.

His eyes skate over to the Slytherin table. They stand out starkly from the rest of the hall. He's not saying it's all of them, not saying that there aren't some Slytherins' with tense faces and slouched shoulders. He's just saying it's a lot less than the rest of the school.

James sighs, pushing his plate away and getting to his feet.

“Where are you going?” Sirius asks. “Class doesn’t start for another half-hour.”

James holds up the folded parchment in his hand. “Gotta post a letter to my mum, I’ll see you in charms?”

“Yeah, alright.”

James pats him on the shoulder, giving Peter and Remus a nod before heading out of the hall and towards the owlery.

Things are...okay...between him and Sirius. He’s at least talking to James again, which is something. But there’s an undeniable stiffness to their conversations. It makes James's skin crawl. He keeps telling himself to follow Lily’s advice and apologize. Or admit that he’s scared. Say something. Anything. But months have passed and he still hasn’t. Tomorrow, he keeps telling himself, I’ll do it tomorrow.

The one upside to this, if there is any, is that it seems to have forced Sirius and Remus to come to some sort of agreement. James isn’t exactly sure what it is, he just knows that the weirder things get between him and Sirius the easier they get with Sirius and Remus. He tries to think of it as a good thing. Tries not to be jealous. Not to hate Remus for it.

So things are tense. Tense at school. Tense outside of school. You can feel it when you walk down the halls, feel it in the whispered insults and rumours. Who cast the mark? Where are they? Why haven’t they been caught? In the white faces of the first years you see the other fear: are they coming for us?

Honestly, James is sick of it. So maybe that’s why, on his way back down from the owlery, when he spots a head of short, black curls disappearing around the corner in front of him, he decides that charms is not at all what he wants to be doing with his morning.

Luckily, the corridor Regulus turns down is empty and James settles himself against the wall, watching the back in front of him for a minute before letting out a whistle.

Regulus looks over his shoulder, sees James, does a double take, then slows to a stop and turns around. He stands there for a few minutes, seemingly unable to decide whether to be surprised or annoyed.

“Can I help you Potter?” he asks eventually.

James smirks. “I bet you can,” he nods towards the door beside him, and sees Regulus recognize it for what it is.

“A broom cupboard Potter? Really? How gauche of you.” But he steps forward anyway, eyes darting around the hallway, checking that they’re still alone.

“Broom cupboards are highly undervalued spaces you know.”

Regulus arches his brow. “Are they?”

James nods. “Everyone always goes on and on about the towers and the great hall and the moving staircases. But when do they ever talk about the real backbone of this castle?”

“The broom cupboards?” he can see Regulus fighting off a smile and it makes something warm pool in James’s stomach.

He opens the door, gesturing with a dramatic bow for Regulus to enter. “The broom cupboards.”

As soon as the door closes behind them Regulus rounds on James, sending him a pointed look. “You going to tell me what the hell this is about?”

Regulus’s hair is still short, but it’s grown enough that little curls have started to wisp around his ears and the back of his neck. James is a little obsessed with it, if he’s being honest.

“James?” Regulus asks, and James realizes he’s been staring.

“Sorry, you’re very distracting” he grins out of the corner of his mouth and watches Regulus blush even as he rolls his eyes.

“Yeah, yeah—what do you want?”

“I just realized what day it is, that’s all,” James says, still grinning as he leans back against the door.

Regulus looks at him flatly. “It’s Wednesday.”

“Yes. It’s the Wednesday I take you into the forest.”

There’s a beat of silence.

“Have you lost your mind?”

“Jury’s out on whether or not I had it to begin with,” James quips, and then, more sincerely; “C’mon Reg, it’ll be fun. Besides, I have something I want to show you.”

“Oh well, in that case,” he says sarcastically. “James, I have transfiguration in fifteen minutes.”

“Ah, but what if you didn’t though?”

Regulus is apparently so outraged by this statement that all he can manage in response is a series of indignant noises that James has to try very hard not to laugh at.

After enduring a few seconds of silent glaring James holds out his hand and, reluctantly, Regulus allows himself to be pulled forward, pressing into James who bends down, nosing at the spot just behind Regulus’s ear. James’s lips brush his skin and he feels Regulus shiver.

“C’mon on Reg,” he hums, “break the rules for me.”

Regulus scoffs but it lacks conviction. “I’m already breaking the rules.”

“So break them a little more,” he kisses him gently just under his jaw.

“You—are ridiculous.”

“Mhm,” James continues his light kisses, innocent, purposeless, trailing all along his neck.

“Merlin—fine—FINE,” he’s breathing heavy when he steps back, face fully red now, and James can’t help but look smug.

“You’re going to kill me one of these days,” Regulus murmurs, running a hand over his short hair, trying to straighten himself out.

“Nah, never. What would I do without you?” he sends him a smile that makes something flicker in Regulus’s eyes.

He has half a mind to ask him about it but doesn’t want to push his luck. “You wait here—“

“Wait here? In the broom cupboard?”

“—I’ll go grab the invisibility cloak,” ignoring him as his hand reaches for the doorknob. “It’ll take me five minutes.”

“James Potter, I am not going to wait for you in a broom cupboard!”

Regulus does wait for him in a broom cupboard—even if he makes several angry comments about it under his breath after James gets back. With the cloak it’s incredibly easy to get out of the castle and passed the Care for Magical Creatures class on the lawn outside. Spring is only just blooming, the weather still cold enough that you need a jacket or sweater. But the snow is gone, and today the sun is out, making it feel warmer than it is. James waits until they’re sufficiently past the tree line before he takes the cloak off.

“I can’t believe I let you convince me to do this,” Regulus mumbles, wand held in his hand like he’s expecting to be attacked at any moment. Which is fair enough, there are a bunch of nasties in these trees, luckily James knows this place pretty well by now. Knows where to go and what not to step on.

“I’ve never skived off class before.”

James smiles down at him, stepping over a fallen trunk. “What? No! I’m shocked.”

Regulus shoves him into a nearby tree and James lets out a laugh that is, admittedly, quite loud.

“Merlin, keep your voice down before everything in here knows where we are.”

James rolls his eyes, pushing some bushes out of the way as he leads them on. “Everything worth being afraid of already knows we’re here.”

The branches are thick over their heads causing the sunlight to drip down, lighting the way in tiny puddles.

“I’m sorry what?” Regulus turns to him, indignant.

“Don’t worry, they won’t bother us as long as we don’t bother them. Just stay out of their space.”

“Their space,” Regulus repeats slowly, like it’s the stupidest thing he’s ever heard. “How do you know what their space is, exactly?”

James shoots him a smile. “You follow me.”

“Oh, because you’re the beast whisperer are you?”

“I just happen to have excellent intuition,” he looks at Regulus out of the corner of his eye. “Also, maybe don’t call them beasts.”

“What?”

James shrugs. “Just not very polite, is it?”

There’s a beat or two of silence before Regulus laughs, his laugh is softer than James’s, quieter. It’s something James always wishes he could hold in his hand or slip in his back pocket and keep for later.

“You are an enigma you know that?”

“Me?” James demands, slightly outraged. “You, Regulus Black, want to call ME an enigma?”

“Half the time you’re this obnoxious Quidditch lad—“

“I am not a lad. How am I a lad? I don’t have "lad" energy at all!”

“Oh yes, you do,” Regulus goes on, clearly enjoying this a little too much. “Walking through the halls like you own the place, like some bloody jock teen heartthrob—“

“Oi! You’re also a jock.”

But Regulus shakes his head. “I’m on the Quidditch team,” he says, ducking below a low hanging branch, “but I’m not a jock.”

“That makes no sense at all.”

Regulus only waves him off. “You really should be such an airhead and then—then—it’s like you think about everyone all the time. You care more than anyone I’ve ever met it’s—“ he

shakes his head, lost for words. And then; “I get it though, why Sirius was drawn to you. Why he became so obsessed.”

James scoffs, unable to tell if Regulus is being sincere or just having a laugh. “Sirius has never been obsessed with me.”

“Yes, he has. He is. I used to hate it.”

And doesn’t that just peak James’s interest. “Were you jealous?”

Regulus huffs out a laugh. “Of course I was jealous. You were cooler than me, and older than me, and I knew exactly what was going to happen.”

“And what’s that?”

Regulus is quiet for a moment, the noise of twigs snapping under their feet the only thing filling the space between them.

“I knew you were going to take him away,” he says it like he doesn’t want to. Like it has to fight its way out of his mouth.

“I don’t think I took him away as much as you lot forced him out—“ and then, of course, his brain catches up with his mouth and he realizes what he’s just said. “Or—not you, but—“

Luckily, he’s saved from having to explain himself as they break through the foliage and into the clearing on the other side. Regulus lets out a gasp that James is pretty sure he’s going to be replaying in his head for the next week.

“Sweet, huh?” James says smugly, looking out at the small waterfall in front of them. The water slips down the rocks and pools in a decent sized pond at the bottom, the green vines snaking along the stones only just starting to bud with little pink flowers. He found it last year during one of the full moons, and he’s been back with Sirius a few times since.

“It’s beautiful,” Regulus says, without the trees over their heads the sun pours down uninterrupted, making the water sparkle.

James nods, knocking his shoulder against Regulus’s before stepping forward and starting to unbutton his shirt.

“Um—excuse me? What are you doing?”

“Going swimming, obviously,” he shoots Regulus a grin as he slides the shirt off his shoulders.

“Swimming?” Regulus repeats indignantly. “You can’t go swimming in there James, are you completely insane?”

“And why not?”

“Well, for starters, it’s going to be freezing.”

“Ah, good point,” James pulls out his wand, casting a warming charm over the water before bending down to check the temperature with fingers. “Perfect,” he winks at Regulus over his shoulder, the younger boy looking scandalized.

“Did you just—did you just warm the whole pond?” he asks

“Mmhm,” James straightens up, dropping his wand onto the pile with his shirt and glasses.

“That’s—that’s a complicated variation on that spell,” he says, somewhere between impressed and annoyed.

“Is it?” James asks innocently, slipping out of his trousers and standing in front of Regulus in his pants. “Well, c’mon?”

“Wait—James—Jesus, you absolute mad man, you can’t just go jumping into a random body of water in this forest of all places!” he sounds nearly hysterical and James has to bite down on his lower lip to keep from laughing. “You have no idea what could be in there.”

He does actually, having been in several times. First as a stag, of course, always safer that way.

“Reckon we might run into some mermaids?” he asks cheekily.

Regulus gives him a flat look. “That would not be nearly as fun as you seem to think it would be.”

James shrugs. “Well, only one way to find out.”

“No, there is definitely more than one way to find out.”

“C’mon Reg,” he stands at the edge of the shore, back to the water, “what’s life without a little risk?”

“Safe.”

James only laughs as he falls back into the water. It’s deceptively deep, and he flips himself around so he can dive further down before coming back up for air.

“James Potter I swear to merlin if whatever is in that water doesn’t kill you I will,” he hears as he breaks the surface. Reg is on his hands and knees at the water’s edge, a stern look on his face.

James shakes out his hair, swimming back over. “Seems a bit contradictory, don’t you think?”

Regulus makes a growling noise that James secretly loves.

“Reg,” he says softly, sincere as he can manage. “It’s safe, I promise.”

Regulus searches his face for a moment. “You’ve done this before?”

James nods. “About a dozen times.”

Regulus looks no less exasperated. “What kind of person wanders into a deadly forest just to have an afternoon swim?”

James only rolls his eyes, diving back below the surface. The water is so clear that he’s almost certain this whole place has been magicked, by the founders or someone who came after. Everything about it is so idyllic—so juxtaposed to the rest of the dark, overgrown forest.

He comes back to the surface and finds Regulus on his feet again, shoes and socks off, shirt halfway undone.

“There we go,” James smiles, spitting water out of his mouth.

Regulus sends him a dry look. “I can’t believe I’m doing this.”

“I can, it’s brilliant.”

The younger boy shimmies out of his shirt and James feels something tug hard on his gut. He’d forgotten that he’d never seen Regulus anything but fully dressed before and he hadn’t quite prepared himself for what it would feel like. Which apparently is overwhelming. Shirtless Regulus, James realizes, is a special kind of weakness for him.

“You’re sure there’s nothing in here that’s going to eat me?” Regulus does away with his trousers and comes to stand at the edge of the water. “James?”

“What? Sorry?” James shakes himself, trying to focus.

“No sea monsters, oui?”

James blinks. “Was that French? Did you just speak French to me?” He’s not sure his heart can handle this.

Regulus blushes. “Sorry, it just slipped out.”

“Do NOT apologize. Say something else.”

“What?”

“In French, say something else,” James is treading water, shoulders bobbing in and out of the pond, and he’s glad to have an excuse for the breathless sound of his voice.

For a moment he doesn’t think Reg is going to do it, he just stands there watching him. And then; “J’ai peur de te blesser,” his voice is soft, changed by the different accent, the syllables gooey in a way they aren’t in English, “parce que je t’aime. Je pense que je le ferai toujours.”

James makes a pleased humming noise. “What did you say?”

Regulus blinks before looking away. “I said your hair looks ridiculous.”

James scowls. “Did not.”

“Are you suddenly fluent in French Potter?”

“Oh, please,” he rolls his eyes, “don’t start with ‘Potter’ again. Makes me feel like I’m in detention or something.”

Regulus snorts. “A familiar feeling for you, I’m sure.”

“Har, har, har, now get in here before I drag you in.”

“Pfft,” Regulus scoffs. “You woul—“

But before he can finish he gets a face full of water as James splashes, what seems like, nearly half the pond on him.

“You. Are. Five.” Regulus bites out, wiping the water from his face.

James only laughs. “Big words from the man still standing on the shore,” he starts to swim further out, but stays on his back so that he doesn’t break eyes contact with Regulus. “Come on Black, come and get me.”

He sees the light flash in Regulus’s eyes. “You’re mine Potter.”

James laughs again, turning to swim away properly as he hears Regulus hit the water.

Yes, he thinks, cutting across the pond. Yes I am.

A while later they’re lying on their backs in the sun, Regulus dressed again, James still in just his pants, both with their eyes closed, enjoying the warmth.

“We’ll have to go back eventually, I can’t skip out on the whole day,” Regulus says, causing James to make a childish grumbling noise.

“Ugh why? School is so miserable. Here is so nice.”

“Yeah, nice until something eats us.”

James snorts. “Nothing is going to eat us.”

“If you say so.”

James cracks his eyes open, turning his head to look at Regulus. It really is a bit ridiculous, how much he enjoys it, just watching him. How he could do it all day. His skin is flushed from the sun, curls slightly tighter after the water. James wants to run his hands through them but he’s pretty sure Reg doesn’t want to be touched right now. He’s gotten good at picking up on his moods, on the way they shift. There are good days and bad days, sure, but there are

also good moments and bad moments. It changes, even within the time they spend together. James understands that, even if he doesn't know why.

"You're staring," Regulus says without opening his eyes.

James smiles. "You're beautiful."

Regulus makes an indignant noise. "I don't know why you say that."

"I don't know why you don't believe it."

He sees Regulus tense and then force himself to relax. "I've never heard it before."

Which James thinks is a travesty. "Well, you are."

Silence drifts back around them, filled by the noise of the breeze in the trees and the humming of the water beside them.

"Hey Reg?" James finds himself asking.

"Mm?"

"Have you—have you done this," he motions between the two of them "...before?"

He feels the stillness as much as he sees it, watching Regulus's adam's apple bob up and down as he swallows.

"Yes," he says carefully.

James thinks that, deep down, he already knew that, but still he finds himself surprised by it. "Was it serious?"

He watches lines appear on Regulus's face as he squeezes his eyes more tightly closed.

"I guess that would depend on your idea of serious."

James accepts this, resisting the urge to reach out and smooth the wrinkles from his face. "They never told you you were beautiful?"

He hears Regulus's breathing hitch.

"Reg—"

"No," he interrupts quickly. "I—they didn't see me that way. Most people don't see me the way you see me. Je ne le mérite pas."

James feels his chest grow tight at the tone of Regulus's voice, rolling towards him and onto his side. "It's not the way I see you. It's just the way you are."

Regulus brings his hands up to cover his face. "You can't—say things like that—to me." His words are choked, like he doesn't have the air to force them out.

“Why?”

“Because they hurt.”

“They aren’t supposed to.”

Regulus nods, dropping his hands to look at James again. “I know.”

And oh that look. That look breaks his heart.

“I’m sorry,” James whispers, but Regulus just shakes his head.

“Don’t be,” he reaches out and runs his hand through James’s wet hair, James closes his eyes falling into the touch. “I just wish I—I just wish this was easier.”

There’s is a delicacy to this confession. A vulnerability that James knows Regulus hates. His hand pauses, thumb rubbing gentle circles into James’s temple.

“I don’t think important things are supposed to be easy,” he says, voice soft. He opens his eyes to find that Regulus has rolled onto his side as well. “You’re important Reg, you’re so fucking important. Especially to me.”

Regulus’s eyes widen, thumb stilling. “Je ne te mérite pas,” he mumbles again.

“What does that mean?” James asks, practically whispering, anything else would feel too loud in the fragile space that’s built up around them.

Regulus looks back at him, grey eyes full of so much feeling they nearly swallow James whole. Eventually he exhales, propping himself up on his elbow and leaning down to press a chaste kiss to James’s mouth. He can taste the water. The sunlight. The sadness.

Regulus pulls back, still leaning over him. “I said your hair looks ridiculous.”

A choked laugh finds its way up James’s throat. “I don’t believe you,” he turns his head, kissing the palm of the hand that’s still holding him.

Regulus smiles sadly. “Good.”

They head back to the castle for lunch. James makes several attempts to dry his hair with little success. Domestic spells have never been his strong suit but even Regulus can’t seem to get it to work.

“There’s just so much of it,” he says, exasperated.

“Whatever, if anyone asks I’ll just tell them I took a shower or something.”

Regulus arches his brow. “Do people often ask you about your hair?”

“Obviously,” he makes a show of primping it, “it’s got quite the fan club.”

“I’m sure it does.”

They part in an empty corridor, James whipping off the cloak and Regulus instantly pulling away.

“I’ll see you later, yeah?”

The younger boy nods, “yeah.”

James makes a run back to Gryffindor tower to drop off the cloak and grab his books. He tries to do something with his hair again but it’s no use.

“You are bloody ridiculous,” he mutters at it before giving up and heading for the Great Hall. He’s about two corridors away when he spots his friends, chatting against the wall outside of class. He’s in such a good mood that he forgets that he ditched them without any warning this morning. That he went to the owlery and never came back. Forgets that they will almost certainly demand an explanation. He blames the sun. Blames Regulus’s mouth. They’ve made his brain go fuzzy.

“James!” Peter is the first one to see him, causing the other two to swivel towards him.

James smiles until he sees the expression on Sirius’s face.

Oh, he thinks.

Oh shit.

“That was some trip to the owlery,” his friend says coldly.

“Er—“

“Is your hair wet?” Remus asks, squinting at him.

Fuck.

“Yeah, I took a shower.”

“Where?” Sirius demands, voice almost as sharp as the look in his eyes.

“What?”

“Where did you take a shower? Because it wasn’t in our room, we checked.”

James opens and closes his mouth several times but can’t quite make any words come out.

“What? Nothing?”

“Sirius,” Remus cautions, James appreciates the effort, but they both know it’s a lost cause.

“You taking your ‘walks’ in the middle of the day now? Damn Jamie, it’s a miracle you can stand with all the bloody walking you do.”

“Sirius—“

“No, fuck you,” Sirius cuts him off, clearly fuming. “I’m so tired of your bullshit. I mean, you can’t even be bothered to come up with a decent lie for fucks sake. You couldn’t care less about us if you tried.”

“OKAY,” James cuts across him, “that’s not fair.”

“Yeah whatever, I’m done with this,” Sirius makes to walk away but James grabs his arm and then, in a split second decision, starts dragging him towards the empty classroom next to them.

“Oi!” Sirius says indignantly, but he doesn’t really put up much of a fight.

“James,” Remus steps forward, eyes travelling nervously between the pair of them, clearly unsure of whether or not he should step in.

“Me and Pads need to have a talk, we’ll meet you guys in the great hall, yeah?”

Remus still hesitates, hovering in the doorway as James shoves Sirius inside.

“Moony, I’m not going to fight him, I promise. I just want to talk.”

“I might fight him,” Sirius calls from behind James.

Remus raises his eyebrow but James waves his concerns away. “If he really wants to throw a punch I can take it.”

“Well that’s comforting,” Remus says dryly. He looks between them one more time before shaking his head. “C’mon Pete, lets go,” he disappears back into the corridor, door closing behind him.

James exhales, gearing himself up for whatever the hell is coming next because, to be honest, he doesn’t really have a plan.

Sirius glares at him. “So,” he spits, “are we going to discuss your favourite routes?”

“Sirius.”

“—the sights you see along the way? I hear the grounds are great for bird watching, maybe that’s what you’ve been doing with your time—“

“Sirius.”

“—course, probably not the best time for bird watching, the middle of the night, star gazing then? Shall we discuss our favourite constellations? Mine, personally, is Alpha Canis Majoris, but you can see why I might be slightly bias—“

“I’ve been seeing someone.”

Sirius shuts his mouth, the tirade of words coming to an end, leaving them just standing there, staring at one another. The silence feels deafening.

“Yeah,” Sirius says finally, some of the energy gone out of him but none of the anger, that still simmers under his words, “no shit.”

James doesn’t exactly know what to say to that.

“You’ve been lying about it for months. Poorly, sure, but still lying. To me.”

“Yeah,” James refrains from pointing out that Sirius has also been lying—or at the very least neglecting to mention that he snogged one of their best mates. He can’t quite see that accusation going over well right now.

Sirius stares at him expectantly, clearly waiting for some kind of explanation.

He takes a deep breath. “It’s a bloke.”

Sirius blinks, his entire body going rigid. It’s such a sudden change that James can spot it even from across the room.

“What?”

“The person I’ve been seeing, he’s a boy. He doesn’t want anyone to know. That’s why I didn’t tell you, I’m sorry. Really.” He says it quickly because he knows if he takes his time he won’t get it out. That the words will get stuck in his throat. It’s not the whole truth, he knows that, but it’s as close as he can get right now.

The silence is stretching on too long and James can feel himself growing anxious. He hopes that this wasn’t a mistake. He wanted to make things better, he wanted to get rid of the wall that’s been slowly building itself between him and Sirius these past few months. He wanted his friend back.

“You didn’t tell me because he asked you not to,” Sirius says finally, “or you didn’t tell me because you were afraid of how I’d react?”

James sighs, passing a hand over his face and meeting Sirius’s eye. “Does it matter?”

“Yes. To me. It matters.”

He’s not sure what the right answer is here. If there is a right answer. “Both,” he says finally. “It was both.”

He can’t read the expression on Sirius’s face, has no idea what he’s feeling. James just wants him to tell him it’s okay. That they’re okay. He opens his mouth to say as much when Sirius suddenly starts forward.

He’s leaving, James thinks, feeling his heart clench.

Fuck.

Fuck.

But then Sirius wraps his arms around him, pulling him close, and in his shock it takes James a few minutes to respond—to hold him back.

“I’m sorry,” Sirius says, squeezing him. “I’m sorry for whatever I did that made you think you couldn’t tell me.”

James doesn’t think he’s ever been so relieved in his life, a shaking breath escaping his lungs as he drops his head against his friend’s shoulder. “God, I’m so glad that you—“ but his voice cuts out on him, an unexpected wave of emotion closing his throat.

“You’re my brother James, my family, there’s nothing—“ Sirius pulls back so that they can look at each other. “There’s nothing bigger than that okay? Not ever.”

James feels ridiculous, getting choked up over this, but he’d been so worried. “I feel the same,” he coughs, clearing his throat, trying to get rid some of the tightness, “obviously.”

“Now who’s gone soft eh?” Sirius grins and James shoves him. It feels good. It feels like he can breathe again.

He still doesn’t know it’s Regulus but James pushes that thought away, not willing to deal with it right now.

“Listen,” Sirius’s expression is sincere again, “I need to—there’s something I need to tell—“

But at that moment Albus Dumbledore’s voice fills up the room, so loud that James has to cover his ears.

“All students are to go to the Great Hall immediately. I repeat, all students are to go to the Great Hall immediately.”

“What the hell was that?” Sirius demands, looking around like he’s expecting to find the headmaster standing behind him.

James shakes his head, hands dropping away from his ears. “No idea, never heard him do that before.”

“Oi!” Sirius says suddenly. “You reckon they caught the people who put up the mark?”

James shrugs. “You think they’d call a school assembly for that? Usually they make us wait to get the news from the Prophet like everyone else.”

“Yeah, but these are extreme circumstances.”

And while James is still skeptical, he can’t say that Sirius doesn’t have a point. “God, who knows, maybe.” He can already hear the sounds of students outside the door.

“I hope they did, I can’t wait see those bastards crumble in front of the Wizengamot.”

“You think they will?” James asks as they push their way outside. The halls are a mess, confused students looking around, making their way uncertainly towards the great hall.

“Course, you know they’re all Slytherin’s—big and bad until McGonagall has them in her sights and then it’s all ‘please professor’ ‘I didn’t mean it professor’ ‘please don’t be mean to me professor’.”

James snorts. “Sounds like you’re doing an impression of Peter.”

Sirius barks out a laugh so loud the people in front of them turn back in alarm.

“You can’t tell him I said that.”

“Oh, I’m definitely going to.”

“Come on, you know he—“

“Here—James! Sirius!” James looks ahead to see Remus waving at them through the chaos that is the Great Hall. James waves back, grabbing hold of Sirius and dragging him through the sea of students to where their friends are sitting at the Gryffindor table.

“Any idea what’s going on?” James asks as they sit down.

Remus shakes his head. “Not a clue.”

“We just got here and then the food disappeared,” Peter adds, looking mournfully at the empty table.

“Hey,” Remus says a bit quitter, nudging James, “you two work it out?” he nods to Sirius whose eyes are trained on the Professors at the head table.

“Yeah,” James gives him a smile. “Yeah we worked it out.”

“Good.”

“EVERYONE,” all heads snap towards the front of the room where Dumbledore stands at the podium, wand pointed at his throat. “QUIET.”

The reaction is instant, couldn’t have been faster if it’d been enforced by magic. James looks over at the Slytherin table but he can’t spot Regulus amongst the crowd of green and silver.

“Better,” Dumbledore smiles kindly, lowering his wand. Behind him all the teachers are assembled, but none of them are sitting, which feels a bit ominous if James is being honest.

“Now,” the headmaster goes on, “as I am sure you are all aware, a few months ago a mark was cast over London, one that has been associated with a group of witches and wizards who call themselves Death Eaters,” he pauses, eyes running over the body of students before him, James isn’t sure he’s ever heard the great hall so quiet. Everything is still, it feels like even the enchanted sky above them has frozen.

“It is now believed that this was a warning, foreshadowing an attack that took place today in Diagon Alley.”

James feels the air rush out of his lungs, frightened whispers growing up around him. Dumbledore raises his hand and without even having to say a word all mouths shut.

“As of right now,” he licks his lips, “thirteen people have been pronounced dead. Five are in critical care at St. Mungos.”

Nothing can keep the silence after that.

“Thirteen,” he hears Remus hiss beside him. “That’s—that’s never happened before has it?” he looks at James as if he knows. “There’s never been that many—“

“It is believed,” Dumbledore continues, speaking over all the other voices, “that the victims were specifically targeted. We do not, at this time, have confirmation on the names of the victims, but classes have been cancelled for the rest of the afternoon and students will be summoned one at a time by their heads of house to contact their families,” he gives them another sweeping look. “In this hour of tragedy our friends are our greatest resource. Our strength. Be there for one another, and we will make it through this. Thank you, you’re dismissed.”

There’s shuffling, feet on the floor, benches being pushed back from the table, but James can’t move. An icy sensation dripping down his bones.

“James?” Remus asks, but he barely registers it, his name floating passed him, unable to permeate the new bubble of panic slowly surrounding him.

“Hey, Prongs,” Sirius’s hand comes down, warm and steadying on his shoulder, and James blinks up at him. “What is it?”

James swallows. “My mum,” his voice breaks, “she said—she said she was going to Diagon Alley.”

They end up outside on the lawn. James grabs his snitch—something to do, something to keep his hands busy. He wanted to fly but Flitwick saw him with his broom and quickly put an stop to that plan. Apparently, all students are to remain on the ground for the foreseeable future.

He begged McGonagall to let him floo his parents.

“Alphabetical order Potter,” she said, already sweeping past him with the first student. “I’m sorry.”

So here he is, sitting with his friends on the lawn, throwing a snitch up and down and trying not to think about the fact his mum might be—well.

There are other students around, though most groups are like them—tense, quiet. It feels weird, their fear out of place under the sun. The world does not look tragic, and somehow that makes it all the more unnerving.

Remus lets out a sharp hissing noise and James looks down in time to catch him grimacing at his potions textbook.

“You okay Moony?”

He nods stiffly. “Yeah, sorry.”

“Don’t apologize.”

“You need me to grab you a pain potion?” Sirius asks, propping himself up on his elbows.

But Remus shakes his head again. “Nah, it’s not so bad this month.”

The full moon is tomorrow. James had almost forgotten. He runs his friend over one more time—pale, purple bags under his eyes, shivering slightly.

“You let us know if you wanna go back up to the room okay?” James says, even though he doesn’t think he could stand sitting in that quiet. At least out here there are things to distract himself with. At least out here he doesn’t feel trapped.

“Thanks, but I’m fine, really.”

Remus has already been called up to MacGonagall’s office. His mother was there, his father at work, both fine. It’s good, Remus doesn’t need anymore tragedy in his life. James tries not to let the other thoughts in, the ones that say that that makes it just a little bit more likely that his mum is one of the victims. Lyall Lupin would make sense as a target, he’s already been one once after all. James hates himself for thinking that, hates himself for wanting it—even for a second.

This time, when he catches the snitch, his hand wraps around it a little more tightly.

Just not my mum, he thinks over and over again. Not my mum. Anyone but my mum. Which, again, is a shitty thing to want, especially as he looks at the other kids around him. There aren’t that many wizards and witches in the world, really there aren’t. That thirteen were killed today. Thirteen—

Just not my mum.

Please not my mum.

Anyone but my mum.

He can’t remember the last time he told her he loved her. He thinks of the pitiful letters he’s been sending home, once every three weeks at most, barely a paragraph long. How could he be so callous?

He loves his dad. Really, he does. But his home is his mum. Without her—without her he—

“James?”

His head snaps up at the feel of Sirius’s hand on his arm. James tries to breathe.

“She’s going to be okay,” Sirius says, voice firm, no hint of doubt. His eyes demand James stay still, just for a moment, demand he hear what’s being said to him. “I promise.”

And he wants to tell him that he can’t—can’t possibly promise that. Except that the brilliant thing about Sirius Black, his best mate, is that he makes you believe that he can.

James nods stiffly. “Thanks.”

“course.”

Sirius has only just pulled back when the sound of smug laughter cuts across the lawn. James looks up and sees Snape and Mulciber coming out of the castle and they’re—fucking—laughing. He sees Regulus pushed against a wall. Sees him struggling to breathe. Sees Snape looming over him, not giving a shit.

I just hope I’m there to see it, Snape had said to him.

See what?

See them break you.

It happens so fast, like a switch has been flicked in his brain and suddenly all his fear and regret and pain turns to anger. It hits him so hard he shakes with it.

He’s on his feet before he can think about what he’s doing, someone calls his name—Remus, he thinks—but he doesn’t turn away. His wand is already out by the time Snape sees him coming. He doesn’t care that they’re in the open, surrounded by people, that he will definitely be punished for this. Good, he thinks, let them watch.

“Levicorpus,” James snaps, dragging Snape up into the air by his ankles.

He sees Mulciber raise his wand but it’s knocked out of his hand in the same moment as Sirius comes up beside him.

“Thanks Pads.”

“Anytime Prongs.”

“What the fuck Potter!” Snape shouts, voice loud in the somber afternoon. There is something dangerous in the air. Something that snaps and crackles and threatens to ignite. And James is glad for it. Because someone might have hurt his mum, and that makes him want to burn the world to the ground.

“Hey Pads?” he says, loud enough that everyone watching can hear. He fully intends to make a show of this. “What colour do you reckon Snivellus’s pants are?”

“Ugh, Prongs,” Sirius responds in the same showman-like tone, and honestly, it feels good. The two of them, doing what they do best. “You’re gonna make me sick-up my lunch.”

He hears snickering from some of their audience and feels a nasty smirk curling his lips.

“You think he washes them as much as he washes his hair?”

“You mean never?”

More laughter.

“Fuck. You.” Snape punches out, struggling though James can’t imagine why. It’s his spell, he ought to know better than anyone that there’s no way he’s getting down until James puts him down.

“Wanna bet on it? I say they’re green.”

Sirius smirks. “My money’s on grey—or brown—the creep has no style.”

“Do you want to do the ho—“

“What the hell are you doing?” her voice cuts across the lawn like a knife. James feels it against his skin, the anger in her voice that hasn’t been direct at him in a long time.

“Ah, Evans, here to see the show?”

She comes up beside him but he doesn’t take his eyes off Snape, doesn’t want to look at her face.

“James,” she says more quietly, almost desperately. “James, I know you’re worried—but this—I thought you were trying to better than this?”

And that irks him. Maybe because it’s true. Maybe because she’s still defending Snape. Even now. Even after everything that’s happened today and everything that she knows that he is.

“He’s one of them,” he says through gritted teeth.

“You don’t know that.”

“Sure I do.”

She makes an exasperated noise. “You can’t punish him just because you feel bad. It won’t change anything. It’ll just make it worse.”

And oh. Oh that’s just bang out of order. Because that isn’t what he’s doing. He isn’t making this up just to—to feel better.

“I thought you were done with him, huh? You told me that, you said it—you don’t like him anymore,” his voice has started getting louder again. “Was that all talk Lily? Just bullshit?”

“No,” she grits out. “But none of that makes what you’re doing okay.”

“Oh and who made you the moral authority? What makes you so good?”

“This is ridiculous—put him down.”

“No.” And this time James does look at her, looks her dead in the eye. “Now shut up or go away.”

Just not my mum.

Please not my mum.

Anyone but my mum.

“Sirius,” he says, turning back to Snape, “take off his trousers.”

And to his credit, Sirius doesn’t hesitate.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you Black,” Lily’s voice is cold. “Unless you want your friend to get stupefied at close range.”

James almost laughs, looking over at her raised wand.

“You gonna hex me Evans?”

She doesn’t even blink. “Absolutely. Now put him down.”

He holds her gaze, unwavering green eyes boring into his. Part of him wants to push her, too see if she really means it. But then, one look at her is all he needs to know that she does.

“Well, Snivellus, aren’t you lucky the pretty girl came to your rescue,” he announces coldly, a smile on his face that feels sharp. “Ever the gentleman, always letting a woman to fight your battles for you,” there’s more snickering from the surrounding crowd.

He watches Snape’s face contort with rage and embarrassment and he thinks that this might actually be better than taking his trousers off.

And then.

“I don’t need a filthy mudblood to defend me.”

He’s not entirely certain what happens next. Everything goes a bit hazy. He knows he drops his wand, and Snape along with it, and then he’s on top of him, driving his fist into his ugly face. He’s not thinking. Not really. It’s all feeling. Pouring out of him and into Snape’s bleeding mouth. The violence feels good. All that anxiety and fear finally finding the outlet its been craving. For a moment he can’t remember why he ever wanted to be better than this.

And then he's thrown back—magic. He lands on his back a few paces away, the air knocked from his lungs. He sits up, trying to get on his feet again, but finds a wand in his face.

"Don't," Lily says through clenched teeth.

"You heard what he said—what he called you," James says indignantly.

But Lily only shakes her head. "Don't you dare use me as an excuse James Potter," it's the break in her voice that catches his attention, and suddenly he can see the wetness in her eyes. "Don't you fucking dare."

She waits a moment longer before sliding her wand back up her sleeve and turning away, James sees Mary and Marlene hovering in the background, concerned looks on their faces as she walks right by them. Snape, of course, is gone. James suddenly feels exhausted.

"Christ, Prongs, are you alright?" Sirius comes up beside him and James lets out a breath that might be a laugh, bringing his hands up to his face. Needing a minute.

He tries to think of this morning—to remember how it had felt, to hear Regulus laugh, to see him smiling in the sun, the warmth of his hands, his mouth. And suddenly he wants him. Just to feel his touch, to hear his voice. He could tell Reg, he thinks, all the terrible thoughts he's had. The weak thoughts. And he'd understand.

Just not my mum.

Please not my mum.

Anyone but my mum.

Regulus doesn't need him to be better. To be stronger. He doesn't know why that suddenly makes his chest feel too tight. He just wants to be back in their room. Just wants to lie next to him in bed and listen to him talk about gods and mortals and a love that can't be stopped by violence and war and death.

"James—"

"Potter?"

James's head snaps up as Frank walks towards them, he falters for a moment, taking in the state of James and seemingly deciding not to comment. He nods his head back towards the castle. "It's your turn."

"Oh thank god," James breathes, scrambling to his feet. He's barely taken five steps before something pulls him back.

"Sirius?" his friend is still kneeling in the grass. "Coming?"

He sees it—the surprise, followed quickly by gratitude. Sirius nods, quickly jogging up to him and causing Frank to arch his brow.

“It’s supposed to just be family.”

“He is family,” James says, in a voice that has Frank raising his hands in surrender.

“Hey, don’t shoot the messenger.”

James doesn’t bother responding, walking so fast he’s practically running into the building.

“She’s going to be okay,” Sirius murmurs bedside him. James only nods, no longer able to muster a response.

He feels like his insides are tearing themselves apart. He thinks about the letter he sent this morning, about how inadequate it was. All the things he needs to tell her. Needs her to know.

“Mr. Potter,” McGonagall barely even blinks when he storms into her office, Sirius at his side. “Mr. Black.”

She’s sitting at her desk, the fire burning next to her and he sees—

“Dad,” his voice catches in his throat. It’s just him.

No.

No. no. no.

He feels Sirius wrap his hand around his arm and squeeze.

“Dad where—“

“James!” his mother is pushing into view, sounding slightly breathless. “Sorry, I just went to turn the kettle off,” she smiles and he feels his legs almost give out, thank merlin for Sirius who is probably the only reason he doesn’t collapse right then and there.

“Mum,” his voice is weak as they stumble forward, both of them getting on their hands and knees by the fire. “You’re okay.”

She looks confused. “I am, of course I am.”

“You said—in your letter—you said you were going to Diagon Alley.”

And suddenly her eyes grow wide. “Oh darling, no—not—not today.”

James is feeling so many things right now that all that comes out of him is a wet sounding laugh.

“I’m so sorry,” she says. “Merlin that must have been terrible for you.”

He shakes his head. “I’m just glad you’re okay. I love you. I love you both so much. I’m sorry I don’t say that enough.”

“Gosh James,” his dad says, running a hand through his hair in a way that is nearly identical to his son. “Don’t make me cry in front of Minerva, she’ll lose all respect for me.”

“Never Fleamont,” comes McGonagall’s voice from behind them.

“Sirius? You alright honey?”

James looks beside himself to find his best friend with wet eyes.

“Yeah, yeah I’m just glad you guys are okay.”

James realizes for the first time how scared Sirius has been, and how he buried it so that he could be strong for James. He swears his heart swells so much it nearly breaks his ribs.

“Oh well, now you’ve gone and done it,” Fleamont says as he pulls off his glasses to wipe his eyes.

“Oi! How come he’s the one who makes you cry?” James demands.

“I like him better than you.”

And that has them all laughing. James feels himself take a proper breath for the first time since he heard Dumbledore’s booming voice. Looking at the people he loves, smiling and crying and safe, he thinks;

Okay.

Okay.

Maybe we’ll be okay.

Maybe we’ll make it through this.

Chapter End Notes

1) "I'm afraid of hurting you. Because I love you. I think I always will."

2) "I don't deserve it."

3) "I don't deserve you."

Hello beautiful people!

Does this chapter work? I sure hope so, but it's becoming one of those things where I feel like I've been looking at it for so long that I don't even know what it is anymore.

Your comments are cupcakes and sunshine! Thank you!

Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Uh-oh.

That's it. That's the whole chapter.

Chapter Notes

TW violence (it isn't graphic or anything but I feel like there's just more than usual in this chapter)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Classes are still cancelled the next day. Some students don't come back from their calls with their parents, and even though the names of the victims haven't been released, everyone knows what that means.

"Moony, I swear to God—get back in bed," Sirius stands at the door, arms crossed over his chest as he stares down a haggard looking Remus.

"I'm just going to get breakfast."

"We'll get you breakfast you loon. You look like shite, get back in bed."

In a turn of events that surprised no one, Remus had actually been rather downplaying how bad he was feeling yesterday and proceeded to spend much of the night, and morning, being sick.

"Moons, he's got a point," James finishes tying his trainers and stands up. "There's no class, no assignments due, give yourself a break for once, yeah?"

Remus shoots him a sharp look. "Et tu, Brute?"

He says it with such conviction that James can't help laughing. "Jesus, you're really out for blood today, huh?"

Remus only grumbles, turning his glare back on Sirius.

"I'm not moving," Sirius leans back against the door, one leg crossing over the other. "Not until you get in that bloody bed, now go on."

It is a face off for the ages, two of the most stubborn people James knows going head to head. Neither of them wavering—he's not even sure they blink.

"Okay, but guys, I'm hungry," Peter says, looking longingly at the door. James's stomach grumbles in agreement.

This does not appear to matter to Sirius or Remus, both of whom maintain their positions like they're the Royal bleeding Guard.

Peter starts inching towards the door. "Maybe I could just sneak by?"

"Not happening Pettigrew," Sirius doesn't take his eyes off of Remus. "No one gets to leave until Moony gets back in bed."

"Trying to turn the room against me?"

Sirius grins, flashing his teeth. "They're already against you my friend."

"Lie down and put us out of our misery Moons," James calls out, which earns him a very rude hand gesture from Remus.

"My goodness," he clutches his chest dramatically. "Hardly appropriate behaviour for a prefect."

Remus crosses his arms over his chest, seemingly doubling down on his position. "I don't know how many times I have to tell you, I'm not an invalid."

"We know," Sirius says. "But you've got a fever and you can't go five minutes without being sick, ergo, bed."

"He does make a compelling argument."

"Shut up James," Remus snaps.

James rolls his eyes, holding his hands up in surrender, leading to several moments of tense silence.

"Moony," Sirius says eventually, ducking his head in a move that James has seen him pull many times, just never with one of them. He stares up through his lashes, all bashful and pouty. Girls fall all over themselves for that look. "For me?" Sirius goes on. "Please?"

Personally, James thinks this is the weakest of his arguments, but apparently Remus disagrees.

He exhales, hands scrubbing at his face before he eventually allows himself to look at Sirius again. "Fine. FINE. I'll stay."

Sirius beams, practically bouncing around him to pull back the covers on his bed.

Remus arches his brow. "Eager much?"

“To get you into bed? Always,” Sirius gives him a wink that has Remus blushing something fierce and James turns to Peter to see if he’s noticed any of this but Peter is already halfway out the door.

“Jeez Pete, in a rush?” he half-laughs, following after him.

“You know how I am about breakfast,” and to be fair, James does know. By the time he gets to the door Peter is already at the bottom of the stairs.

“Wait for Padfoot, would you? Honestly, the Great Hall will still be there in five minutes, Si —“ James turns back to the room to see where Sirius’s is only to find him perched on Remus’s bed. The two of them are whispering, and then James sees Sirius run his knuckle softly along the side of Remus’s face.

“Where’s Padfoot?” Peter demands as James jogs down the stairs into the common room.

“He said he’ll meet us there. C’mon, lets go before your stomach starts eating itself yeah?” he smiles at Peter, mussing his hair as he swings through the portrait and into the corridor beyond.

James feels something warm in his chest as he thinks about the way Remus and Sirius were looking at one another. He’s never seen Sirius so soft. Maybe he finally worked it out, the tosser.

“Why are you smiling?” Peter asks, looking a little unnerved.

James shakes his head. “Just thinking about how much bacon I’m gonna shove in my face when we get down there.”

Peter makes a longing noise. “Me too.”

James’s high spirits decrease slightly as they walk into the Great Hall. The weight of everything that happened yesterday is unavoidable. It’s in the faces of the students around them and in the empty spaces along the tables.

They pass by Marlene, Mary and Lily. Peter waves, while James refuses to make eye contact. He hasn’t quite figured out how he wants to handle that situation yet.

“Are you two back to hating each other, then?” Peter asks as they sit down at the opposite end of the table.

James frowns. “We don’t hate each other—we’ve never hated each other.”

Peter shoots him a skeptical look as he loads an extraordinary amount of scrambled eggs onto his plate.

“We haven’t!” James says indignantly, suddenly feeling defensive.

“I mean, maybe you never hated her, but...” Peter shrugs, moving on to the sausage.

James crosses his arms over his chest, slouching slightly in his chair. “She didn’t hate me, she just...didn’t...like me very much.” Which he has to admit, sounds weak even to his own ears.

“Mhm,” Peter takes a bite out of his toast, “whatever you say mate.”

James keeps pouting for another few minutes before his stomach makes a noise that reminds him that Peter isn’t the only one who’s hungry. He’s halfway through his first serving before he speaks again.

“Hey, I forgot to ask yesterday, with everything that happened,” James swallows the mouthful he’d been chewing, “but how did it go with your mum?”

“Ugh,” Peter moans. “She wanted me to come home—took me ages to convince her I didn’t need to.”

“What? Why would she want you home?”

“You know how she is,” Peter waves around his third piece of toast. “She thinks I’m in danger, she has a bad feeling, being so far away from home isn’t safe,” Peter clears his throat, adjusting his posture, “You know Peter,” he says, in a high-pitched voice that does sound strikingly like his mother. “I was homeschooled until I was seventeen and I can do magic just as well as anyone who went to Hogwarts, ask your father. There’s no need for you to be so far away from me, it’s not natural, surrounded by strangers. Who knows what kind of families they come from.”

Peter rolls his eyes, leaning back in his chair and taking another massive bite of his breakfast.

“Did she really say all that?” James asks.

Peter nods, exhaling through his nose. “I love her, I do, but sometimes I think that woman has completely lost the plot.”

But something nags at James. “What’d she mean—who knows what kind of families they come from?”

“Huh?” Peter looks up, ketchup staining the corner of his mouth. “Oh, I don’t know. Doesn’t want me hanging out with people whose parents didn’t teach them manners or something. Y’know, trouble makers.”

James can’t help laughing at that, biting down on the inside of his cheek to keep from being too loud. “She must be thrilled you hang around with us then.”

Peter smiles a little shyly. “You she doesn’t mind so much, she likes your parents, think that helps. Sirius though?” he lets out a low whistle. “One look at his hair and I heard about it for a week. Said there’d be no long-haired hippies in her house and I better remember that.”

“Long-haired hippy,” James is in near tears he’s holding his laughter back so hard. “You have to tell him she said that, he’ll hate it.”

Peter snorts, shovelling egg into his mouth, “Yeah, no thank you,” words slightly muffled by the food. “The last thing I want to do is have to sit there and listen to him go on a tirade about what punk is.”

James smirks. “Good point—ah, speak of the devil,” he says as Sirius strolls up.

“Aw, were you talking about me? James, really, you do need to get yourself a new hobby, this obsession is getting a bit sad.”

James swats at him as he sits down but Sirius ducks out of the way, pulling two plates towards him.

“Doing one up for Remus?” James asks, trying to sound casual.

Sirius nods. “I won’t bother bringing him much, not like he can keep it down, but he’s gotta eat something. Toast you reckon?”

James nods, turning back to his own neglected breakfast.

“And porridge,” Peter pipes up. “He likes the porridge, especially with raisins and brown sugar.”

“Good call Wormy,” Sirius says, standing up to reach towards the breakfast foods in question.

There’s a noise from above and they all look up to see the owls arriving with the morning post.

“Finally,” James mutters, fingers itching to get his hands on a copy of the Daily Prophet, and by the looks on the faces around him, he’s not the only one.

“You reckon they’ll know anything we don’t?” Sirius asks, watching the ceiling along with James.

He shakes his head. “No idea, hope so.”

James’s owl drops down beside them in a flurry of dark, brown wings. His name is Hoot, which James thought was hilarious when he was eleven, but it doesn’t suit him at all. He’s a very dignified owl, always holding his head up, keeping his feathers clean.

“Thanks Hoot,” James takes the rolled up paper out of his beak before tossing the owl a piece of bacon. He looks down like he’s too good for it, but James doesn’t miss the way he scoops it up when he flies off.

“Well?” Sirius asks, still somewhat preoccupied filling his two plates. “Anything?”

“Blimey, give me a minute would you?” James unfolds the paper and feels his stomach drop. There, on the front page, is a black and white photo of Diagon Alley. It’s the emptiest James has ever seen it, the hanging shop signs the only things moving, and on the road, surrounded by broken glass and rubbish, are several bodies covered with white sheets.

“Jesus, that’s grim,” Sirius hisses, looking over his shoulder before turning back to the task at hand.

James swallows, throat suddenly tight. “Yeah,” he flips the paper open to the article inside.

“Oh shit.”

“What?”

“They have the names of the victims,” James says, eyeing the single column in front of him. They look so small written out like this. So insignificant. A whole life reduced to a line of text.

“James?” Peter asks from across the table, sounding slightly concerned. “You okay?”

James shakes his head, trying to get himself together. “Yeah—yeah sorry, must still be half asleep.”

His eyes run down the names. He has no reason to be nervous, everyone he cares about is here or accounted for, but that doesn’t seem to stop his insides from twisting themselves into knots. Most of the names he recognizes only in a distant way—a family he’s heard mentioned once or twice. Someone’s third cousin on their mother’s side.

Until.

“Oh,” the noise comes out of James involuntarily. He feels his friends turn to him but doesn’t see it, eyes still stuck on the page in front of him.

No, is all he can think.

No.

That isn’t fair.

“James?” Sirius prods, food forgotten. James has his full attention now, and he does his best not to crack under it.

He forces himself to turn, to hold Sirius’s questioning stare. No one’s ever told him how to do this. He doesn’t know if there’s a right way, but he’s almost certain there’s a wrong one.

“Sirius,” he manages eventually, voice strained. “I’m so sorry.”

For a moment the confusion remains, Sirius not able to make sense of what he’s just heard. And then he’s ripping the newspaper out of James’s hands.

“Who—“ Peter starts, but James cuts him off with one quick hand motion, watching as his best friend runs down the list of names. Watching him stop. He doesn’t know what to say. He should, at this point he should know, but words seem to have abandoned him.

Sirius's hands are shaking when he puts the paper back down, elbows resting on the table as he drops his head. Eventually he laughs and it's wet and sad and James feels his heart squeeze.

"I should have known better than to think—to think that I could—" James hears the sob creeping up Sirius's throat, hears him cut it off before it can escape.

Peter grabs the paper from the other side of the table, eyes scanning down until they inevitably fall on Alphard Black. Third from the bottom. One of the last bodies found.

"It's my fault," Sirius says suddenly, voice all wrapped around itself, twisting and pulling and ripping apart.

"It isn't," James says automatically. "Sirius, this is not your fault."

But Sirius only shakes his head, turning to look at James. "It is—they said the attacks were targeted. He'd never done anything—nothing except try to help me. They killed him for it. Fuck," he leans back in his chair, pressing the heels of his hands into his eyes like he can force the tears back.

"You have no idea why they targeted those people, no one does. How would anyone have even found out that he was writing to you?"

Sirius lets out a shaky breath. "I don't know," he drops his hands. "I don't—"

The only warning is his sudden stillness. A second ago he couldn't sit still, grief pulling at his skin, and now, suddenly, stillness.

"Siriu—"

But he's out of his chair, storming toward the doors like he's being chased.

"Where is he going?" Peter asks.

James only shakes his head. "No ide—" and then he sees the back of Regulus's head disappearing into the corridor and he realizes what's about to happen.

"Fuck," it's his turn to jolt out of his seat, jogging down the length of the Great Hall.

"—you did," he hears Sirius say as he bursts into the foyer, turning about himself, looking for the source of the noise. "I know you did."

"You're being irrational," Regulus says, voice flat.

They're only a few paces down the hall, facing one another like they're about to duel. For the first time Regulus isn't the one with his wand out.

"I bet you couldn't wait to tell her," Sirius's voice has teeth.

Regulus sighs. “I told you, I didn’t know you were writing to Uncle Alphard, but even if I had, I wouldn’t have said anything.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Well that sounds like your problem not mine.”

“You selfish, spineless—“

“Okay,” James steps in, grabbing hold of Sirius’s arm as he steps towards his brother whose wand, James can now see, has been expelliarmus-ed down the hall, “that’s enough, Sirius, lets go.”

“It was him,” he pulls against James’s grip. “I fucking know it was. You always were such a little snitch. Tell me, did she reward you? How much was our Uncle’s life worth? A new broom? New robes? What’d you get on your knees for this time Regulus?”

Regulus doesn’t react to his brother’s words, his expression completely unmoved.

“Is this how its going to be Sirius?” he asks eventually, voice flat, emptied of feeling. It makes James ache. “You’re just going to blame me for everything that goes wrong in your life?”

“You’re not innocent Reg, you know that right? Just because you don’t cast the spells doesn’t mean you aren’t every bit as guilty as them. You stand there and you watch and you let it happen.”

“And what’s the alternative?” Regulus asks coldly.

“Regulus—“ James warns as the younger boy steps forward, Sirius barely restrained by James’s grip. Neither of them are paying much attention to him, of course. They never can see anything but each other when they’re together.

“Should I be like you?” the younger boy asks coldly. “Risk everything just so I can watch everyone I love die?”

“Fuck you Reg,” Sirius doesn’t quite manage it without his voice breaking. James can feel the pain caused by Regulus’s words running through him, like they were a physical hit. He stares pleadingly at the boy he loves, willing him to look back, to stop, but his eyes are locked on his brother’s.

“You chose this Sirius.”

Something primal rips itself out of Sirius’s throat as he tries to raise his wand again, tries to get free of James’s grip. And honestly, James doesn’t blame him.

“Well, well, well, what do we have here?” comes a snide voice from over James’s shoulder.

“Christ,” he mutters under his breath, “could we catch a fucking break here?”

Rosier and Crouch saunter towards them, taking their places at Regulus's side. Though, Reg looks like he's no happier to see them than James is.

"You wouldn't be trying to come for our Reggie now would you?" Crouch asks, dark eyed and pointy-faced, sneering down at them as he twirls his wand between his fingers. James already feels the overwhelming desire to punch him in the face.

"Leave it," Regulus says, stepping back, "lets go."

But Rosier and Crouch are sharks, and they can smell the blood in the water.

"Aw, are you upset?" Rosier says in a baby voice. "Did one of your muggle-loving friends get their heads blown off?"

Crouch snickers off to the side and James slowly lets Sirius go, no longer sure he isn't about to whip out his own wand.

"I'd quit while you're ahead Rosier," James growls, but the two Slytherin's only seem to find this more amusing.

"You lot are going to have to get used to this you know, especially if this is the best your side has to offer," he gives them a derisive once over.

"You know," Crouch says, before James can open his mouth again, "I hear some of them begged," there's a nasty glint in his eyes. "Can you imagine? Begging? Fucking pathetic."

"That's what happens when you mix with non-magical folk. Makes you soft," Rosier chuckles. "See, you lot? You lot are going to go one-by-one, and you want to know why?"

"Well I'm sure you're going to tell us," James replies flatly, feeling Sirius buzzing beside him, ready to go off.

Rosier steps up close. Too close, really. His ugly sneer getting right in James's face. "Because you have no fucking claws."

James does punch Rosier in the face then, at the same moment that Sirius sends Crouch flying down the corridor.

"You sure about that Rosy?" James asks as he gets Rosier on the ground before driving his foot into his stomach. "What do you reckon Padfoot?"

"I feel pretty fucking sharp Prongs," he spells Crouch into the air before letting him drop back down again, he lets out a high pitched screeching noise as he crumples to the floor.

"Enough," Regulus snaps, at the same time that Rosier scrambles to his feet and pulls out his wand. James already has his aimed. "Evan, I said enough!" he growls when Rosier's wand doesn't drop.

"Regulus—"

“This is not the time,” Regulus bites out, Crouch only just managing to peel himself off the floor.

James can’t quite believe that they’re going to listen to him, certainly doesn’t believe it enough to lower his own wand. But, to his surprise, Rosier steps back.

“This is a mistake,” he hisses at Regulus.

“Your opinion has been noted, take Barty back to the common room.”

At first Rosier doesn’t move, glaring menacingly at James who honestly has no idea what’s happening anymore.

“Fine,” he spits the word out of his mouth, dragging his eyes up and down James’s body one more time before he goes to help Crouch off the wall.

“Well done Reg,” Sirius says coldly, and James wonders if they’re going to have to do this all over again, but when he looks beside him he sees that Sirius has lowered his wand. “Really putting the Black name to good use I see. Is it bribery? Or have they just met Walburga?”

Regulus stares at him for a beat longer before shaking his head and turning away. Fire and ice they are. Sirius can’t keep his feelings in and Regulus can’t let his out. Either way they’ll destroy themselves if they keep going.

James watches Regulus disappear down the hall, trying to swallow the tempest of emotions currently warring inside him.

“Come on,” he says eventually, nudging Sirius lightly. “Lets go, yeah?”

But Sirius doesn’t respond, instead he turns away and walks very determinedly toward the front doors.

“Sirius?” James calls after him, moving to follow.

“Just—leave me alone James,” he snaps over his shoulder. “I just want to be alone.”

James pulls up short, watching Sirius storm out of the castle. He knows that he means it. When all is said and done, Sirius really isn’t that hard to read. Still. James struggles to fight the urge to start moving again, to follow him anyway. Which isn’t fair. If Sirius wants to be alone, he should be allowed to be. It’s just that James’s wishes that wasn’t what he wanted.

“Maybe you should go check on him?” Remus says for the hundredth time.

James is lying on his bed, arm flung over his eyes. “Is he still by the lake?”

He hears the sound of shuffling—Remus has been pacing back and forth in front of the window for what feels like hours. James has given up trying to get him to relax and is counting it as a win that Remus isn’t trying to go after Sirius himself.

“No,” there’s the unmistakable sound of the map unfolding. “He’s wandering around the third floor now.”

James nods, “He’s fine. He’ll come get us when he needs us.”

“But I won’t—” Remus shuts his mouth, frustrated.

“You’ll be here when it matters,” James stretches, pulling himself up to sitting and seeing that the sun has almost set, “Speaking of which, what time is it?”

“Er—I don’t know, I lost track,” Remus says guiltily, causing James to arch his brow. “Yes, yes, I know.”

“It’s eight,” Peter supplies helpfully.

“Well thank merlin someone is paying attention,” James groans as he gets to his feet. “c’mon Moons, I’ll walk you to the infirmary.”

Remus scowls. “I don’t need you to chaperone me James.”

“Yeah, but I’m obsessed with you remember?” he grins as he holds the door open.

Remus looks down at the map again, worrying his bottom lip between his teeth.

“Remus,” James says softly, and eventually the other boy lifts his head, “we’re going to take care of him, I promise. But right now, we have to take care of you.”

“That isn’t fair to him, he needs you guys, you should stay here tonight. Don’t worry about me, I’ve done it alone before.”

Peter snorts from behind the Witch Weekly he’s currently reading “ironically” on his bed. “Fat chance.”

“I’m with Pete,” James cuts in before Remus can. “We’re going to be there, ALL of us, and then afterwards we’ll deal with the rest okay? Now come on.”

Reluctantly, Remus does.

The common room is almost empty tonight, no one feels much like socializing at the moment. Everything is just slightly...off. Nothing fits right. Nothing sounds right. As much as James is trying to hide it from Remus, it kills him that Sirius hasn’t come back yet. That he’s stayed away this long. Maybe he should have gone after him.

“So,” he says after a long stretch of silence. Remus looks over at him, their steps loud in the empty corridor. “Lily.”

“Ah,” Remus almost smiles. “I was wondering when she’d come up.”

James nods, shoving his hands in his pockets and not saying anything else for a bit. “Do you think I should apologize?”

Remus arches his brow. "I mean, you did beat the shit out of her best mate."

"Yeah, but in my defence, her best mate is Snape."

Remus actually laughs at that, though it quickly turns into a cough that's bad enough that they have to stop walking.

"Sorry," Remus croaks.

"Don't be. You okay to keep going?"

He pauses, breathing in and out a couple times before nodding his head.

"Listen," Remus carries on eventually, "I'm not going to stand here and pretend that I don't think Snape had it coming or that it wasn't satisfying to watch you deck him."

"I knew we'd corrupt you," James grins, causing Remus to roll his eyes.

"But that doesn't mean that you weren't still acting like a brat."

James scrunches his face. "Let's go back to the part where you liked that I decked him."

"I'm sorry," Remus snorts, "but you know it's true."

"He called her—" but James can't finish it, feeling the anger boil up in him so fast he thinks he's going to choke on it.

"I know," Remus says soberly. "Look, give her some space, then go talk to her. You don't have to apologize for not liking Snape, but it might help if you at least admitted that trying to pants him in front of the whole school was a dick move."

James lets out a melodramatic sigh as they come to a stop in front of the infirmary. "Fine, I'll consider it."

Remus tries to hide his smile. "That's all I ask."

James smiles back. "Well, guess I'll see you on the other side huh?"

"Yeah, guess," Remus turns to go but pauses before he makes it inside. "James?"

"Yeah?"

"If Sirius doesn't want to come tonight—or if he doesn't show up in time—don't give him shit for it, okay?"

"Remus, he's going to be there."

"Right," the other boy allows. "But if he isn't? I'm telling you now that that's okay. He gets to have tonight if he needs it, and I don't want you to make him feel guilty for that."

James huffs. “Yes, okay mum. I won’t nag him if he doesn’t want to, but I’m telling you, he will.”

Remus nods. “Thank you.”

“Of course Moons, whatever you want.”

Remus arches his brow. “Whatever I want, huh? In that case, I want you to fold all the—“

“Oh no? What’s that? I can’t hear you? I think we’re breaking up,” James makes a loud static noise as he starts slowly walking backwards.

Remus rolls his eyes. “That’s what I thought. See you James.”

“Always a pleasure Remus.”

He watches the door close and feels something heavy start to grow in the pit of his stomach. Whatever Remus says, Sirius needs to be there tonight. It’s a promise they’ve made to each other—to Remus—to be there every time. Every moon. It’ll feel like a betrayal if Sirius doesn’t show up now.

But Sirius knows that. Understands it the same way James does. All that time they spent getting Remus to trust them, to let them in. This was part of it. Being there when it’s the hardest. Not looking away from the scary bits. Not like his parents. The full moon isn’t optional for Remus. Bad day. Good day. He has to go through it. And so do they—the three of them. It’s their job to be there, to prove to him that it isn’t optional for them either. To prove to him that he’s seen. Completely and utterly. And that all of him is wanted.

Sirius knows that.

An hour later James is feeling less certain.

“Prongs...”

“I know, I know,” James is standing by the window, invisibility cloak in one hand, foot tapping impatiently on the floor. “Just give him another five minutes yeah?”

He should have gone after him. He should have known better than to let Sirius stew on his own for this long. He should have dragged him out of that hallway before him and Regulus even got going.

James sighs, passing a hand over his face and tearing his eyes away from the quickly materializing moon, “Okay, I guess he—“

The door swings open and Sirius waltzes in, not angry, not flustered, he might even be... happy? James has neither the energy nor the time to make sense of that.

“Gents,” he nods to them.

“Thank merlin,” James says, “thought you weren’t going to make it. C’mon we gotta—“

“I’d give it a few minutes if I were you,” and there’s something off about his voice, an empty sort of cheerfulness that makes the hair on the back of James’s neck stand on end.

“Give it a few minutes?” he looks at Peter who shakes his head, just as lost, wand at the ready to turn into Wormtail.

“Sirius, we’re late,” he says slowly, “we have to go—we should have gone twenty minutes ago.”

But instead of grasping the urgency of the situation, Sirius drops onto his bed, crossing his arms behind his head and looking infuriatingly calm.

“Nah, trust me, we’re going to be right on time.”

“I—“ James really has no idea what’s going on, and after floundering about for a few seconds finally manages to speak again; “Listen, if you don’t want to come tonight Moony says it’s okay, but I really think—“

“I ran into Snape just now, on my way back,” Sirius interrupts, completely derailing James’s train of thought.

“I—er—okay?”

It feels like it did. That time in the woods. When Moony went haywire.

Wrong, James’s brain keeps saying. Somethings is wrong. The way Sirius is talking, lying—in control and out of control all at the same time.

“Brilliant it was, like fate, and I just saw it—saw how we would prove them wrong,” he laughs and the noise finds its way between James’s ribs and pulls at his lungs.

“Prove them wrong? Prove who wrong?” James shakes his head. “Never mind, tell me later yeah? We have to go.”

But Sirius just smiles, it’s an expression too sharp to be joyful. “God, it’s so fucking funny—so fucking ironic. Don’t you see?” he turns his head, looking at James properly for the first time.

“See what Pads?” he asks nervously.

“They said we don’t have claws,” still with that same smile on his face, “but we have a fucking werewolf.”

The world stops. James swears the literal rotation of the earth freezes on those words. Cold dripping down his spine.

Wrong.

Wrong.

Wrong.

“We—you—did you tell Snape about Remus?” a question he never thought he’d have to ask and somehow Sirius is still smiling.

“Better than that,” he says. “I told him how to get past the tree.”

James is running. No invisibility cloak. No secret passageways. He runs, feet slamming into the stone floors, chest heaving with the effort. He’s never moved so fast in his life. Never felt so scared—so scared that he’s not even sure this is real, that he hasn’t just fallen into one of his nightmares. Wake up, he thinks, wake up. Wake up. Wake up. Please wake up.

I told him how to get past the tree.

It must have rained at some point because James slips on the grass as he hurtles himself across the lawn, lungs stinging with the cold air. There’s always the chance that Snape didn’t take the bait—that he saw it for the trap that it is. That he just minded his own fucking business for once in his miserable life. But as the willow comes into view James knows that’s not what happened. Knows it from the strange way the branches are holding themselves. Someone’s pressed the knot. Recently.

I told him how to get past the tree.

James doesn’t stop, doesn’t slow down, throwing himself into the passage and towards the shrieking shack, barely breathing. It’s late. They were already running late. He has no time. He doesn’t know what he’s going to do if he gets there and Moony has already transformed. If he gets there and he’s—he’s—fuck.

He bursts into the shack, breathing heavy, pulse loud in his ears as he takes the steps two at a time.

“Get out! GET OUT!” Remus’s voice is stripped bare with fear.

“What the hell are you playing at Lupin? What is this place?”

“Please, please, Snape I’m begging you, leave. Just leave,” he sounds close to tears.

James throws open the door to the bedroom with such force that it slams into the wall behind it. Remus has backed himself up as far away from Snape as he can get—he doesn’t have his wand, of course, completely defenceless, meanwhile Snape has his drawn and pointed right at him.

“James,” Remus says weakly, “James he’s here, he’s—“ Remus doubles over, an agonizing groan ripping out of him.

“What the fuck is going on?” Snape turns on him, pointing his wand in James’s direction but he ignores it, walking right passed him and over to Remus’s side.

“It’s now,” he trembles, “James, James, James,” his voice skips like a scratched record, like he’s losing control of it. “It’s happening now—you have to—he—he can’t—“

“Sh, sh, it’s okay, it’s going to be okay, I promise. I’m going to take care of it,” he wraps his arm around him as gently as he can but Remus still flinches as James guides him back to the mattress.

“What the fuck is wrong with him?” Snape demands.

Remus is hyperventilating, dropping his head between his knees the minute he’s sitting down again, his whole body shaking.

“You have to get—“ but his voice disappears and instead he screams. James wonders if one day that sound will stop feeling like broken glass.

With a shaky breath he turns to Snape, “We have to go. Now.”

Snape only glares, attempting to lean around James so he can get a better look at Remus. “Is he mental—have they let a fucking psycho into Hogwarts?”

“Okay, you’re going to move or I’m going to—“ James reaches into his back pocket for his wand. And keeps reaching.

And reaching.

But there’s nothing there.

He forgot his wand.

He. Forgot. His. Wand.

At that moment he hears the unmistakable noise of bones breaking. He doesn’t need to turn around. He’s seen it before. He knows what’s happening.

And if the new expression of horror on Snape’s face is anything to go by, he does too.

“Move, you idiot. Now. We’re going now.”

James steps forward to grab him but Snape jabs the tip of his wand into his chest.

“A werewolf?” he demands. “The freak is a werewolf?”

“MOVE.”

Some horrendous noise rips itself from Remus’s throat and James sees it happen—sees the wand move from his chest to the boy behind him, sees Snape open his mouth.

“Don’t you dare!” He doesn’t think, he just launches himself forward, tackling Snape before he can get out whatever spell he’s trying to. They crash to the floor, landing hard on his shoulder.

“What’s wrong with you!” Snape’s voice is high as they roll around, dust getting into James’s eyes and mouth—an elbow to the face, a knee to the gut—he still ends up on top. At some point in the scuffle Snape’s wand is lost. He doesn’t know where it goes.

“Get off of me! Get off! Get off! That thing is a fucking monster—do people know? There’s going to be a fucking inquiry. They’ll throw you all in Azkaban—GET OFF OF ME!”

“I would shut your mouth unless you want a repeat of yesterday, asshole. Lily’s not here to rescue you this time.”

“I—“ but suddenly Snape goes still, eyes growing to nearly twice their normal size.

James nearly asks what’s wrong with him when—

Oh.

Oh no.

The screaming’s stopped.

James looks over his shoulder and is met with a pair of glowing, yellow eyes. He tries sometimes, to look for Remus in them. He hasn’t found him yet.

He rolls off of Snape just as the wolf launches itself forward, Snape scrambling out after him. They’re nearly out of the room when Snape jerks to a stop.

“What the fuck are you doing?” James demands.

“My wand—“

James doesn’t wait, grabbing Snape by the front of his shirt and throwing him down the hall towards the stairs.

“I’ll buy you a new fucking wand, now move—“

He hears Moony howl behind them, the noise is loud, shaking the shack, scraping along his bones.

They make it to the top of the stairs before James feels a set of sharp claws sink into his back, throwing him into Snape. They all go careening down the stairs. James manages to knock Moony off but can’t stop himself from falling the rest of the way to the bottom.

Everything shakes. His hands. His head. He’s pretty sure the floor underneath him is shaking. There’s blood. His face maybe? Definitely his back. Somehow he manages to push himself back onto his hands and knees.

Snape is lying beside him. Face down.

“Snape,” he shakes him, and then sees the blood by his forehead. “Fuck,” fear cuts through him like a knife. “Snape? Snape? Severus—fuck.”

A growl from above draws his attention and he looks back to see Moony standing at the top of the landing, seeming so much bigger than he ever has before, lips pulled back over his teeth.

James’s eyes dart around, looking for something—anything—to fight with. They land on the stair bannister. He hears the noise of claws on wood as he reaches for one of the posts and starts pulling.

“Come on,” he hisses, feeling the rotten wood give. Feeling the stairs creak as Moony gets closer. “Come. On.” It pulls off and James spins around, wielding it like a bat.

Moony is nearly on him, launching off the last step as James swings. A clean shot. Right at the face. Moony lets out a whine pulling away but not far and James feels his panic rising. What exactly is his plan here? How is he gonna fight a werewolf with a piece of wood? How is he going to fight Moony?

The wolf’s hackles are up, back arched as he turns to James again—except—except his eyes are on the post in his hands.

“Oh you have got to be kidding me,” James breathes, giving the wood an experimental wave and watching Moony’s eyes follow it.

Admittedly, if this doesn’t work, James will once again find himself defenceless in front of a werewolf. But hey, what’s life without a little risk?

“Okay Moony,” he waves the post around a little more. “Okay, okay, you want the stick? Huh? You want the stick big guy?”

Praying with every fibre of his being that this works.

“Go get it then!” he chucks the post up onto the floor above them and by some absolute miracle, Moony follows.

James doesn’t hesitate, bending down and grabbing Snape by the arms, dragging him towards the door. He can taste blood in his mouth.

It feels like seconds. Maybe less, before a snarl brings his attention back to the stairs. Moony glares at him for a moment, before spitting the post out from between his teeth.

“Fuck.”

James tries to move faster, the door to the passage just behind him, but Moony is moving fast now too.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck.”

He pushes through the door, yellow eyes coming right for him. He lets Snape drop as he scrambles for the handle, slamming the door shut and sliding the metal bolt across the top. There's barely a second before he hears Moony colliding with it on the other side.

He stays with his back pressed against it, breathing so heavy it hurts, sweat covering his skin. Moony growls, pawing at the door, but the lock holds. James tries to exhale, tries to get some kind of control over his heart, his eyes trailing down to the body at his feet.

Snape still hasn't moved.

"I swear to God if you're dead," James murmurs, stumbling beside him, his limbs not quite working properly. He can't tell if it's from the adrenaline or the stairs, but his whole body feels numb. Which is probably a blessing.

He rolls Snape onto his back, pressing his ear to his chest, trying to hear past his own thundering heartbeat.

"Come on you bastard," he hisses.

He feels more than he hears Snape take his next breath, his chest rising and falling under James's ear. He pulls back, looking down at the nasty gash on his forehead that slips up into his black hair, covering half his face with blood.

James brings his hands to his own face, sussing out the damage. Behind him Moony starts howling.

"Alright," he drops his hands, getting Snape's arm over his shoulder and hauling him onto his back. "Merlin you're heavy," he mutters, as he starts to walk.

It's hard, and takes longer than it should. James is pretty sure he's got some nasty bruises along his ribs and shoulder because every time Snape shifts on his back he feels a burning pain down his side. He prays to Godric the wanker doesn't wake up. The last thing he needs is to have to deal with a hysterical Snape making things difficult.

By the time he drags himself out of the whomping willow he's sweating and shaking and only just makes it past the tree branches before dropping Snape onto the grass. Hissing at the sharp pain that shoots through his shoulder.

"Holy shit—"

He looks up and sees Peter and Sirius coming towards him across the lawn. Even in the near pitch black he can tell that Sirius isn't smiling anymore.

"Holy shit, Prongs," Peter repeats.

"How's Remus? What happened?" Sirius asks beside him, sounding nervous.

James ignores him, looking only at Peter. "I need you to go calm him down, he's right by the door so you'll have to transform before you go."

Peter has only barely opened his mouth to respond when Sirius steps forward.

“I’ll go—I’ll—“

“The hell you will,” with everything left in him James shoves Sirius back. “You stay the fuck away from him.”

Sirius blinks, eyes big and swimming in moonlight. He looks lost. And for once in his life James doesn’t care.

“Peter. Go.”

“By myself?” Peter squeaks.

James gives him a look that is apparently enough of an answer because he doesn’t bother arguing again, transforming into a rat and running towards the tree with his wand in his mouth.

The quiet is heavy, Sirius and James just staring at one another, James still breathing hard. He doesn’t know what he looks like—he imagines not good.

“James,” Sirius says weakly—pleadingly. And it makes James angry.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” he snaps. “How could you do that? How could—how could you be so fucking selfish?” he watches Sirius flinch, curling in on himself.

“I don’t know,” he whispers.

“You don’t know?” he’s not sure he’s ever heard himself sound so cold. “Well that’s brilliant Sirius, really. Just thought it’d be funny eh? A good laugh? Another one of your spontaneous pranks?”

Sirius isn’t looking at him anymore, eyes on the ground. “Does he—did he see?” he asks eventually, nodding to Snape.

“Isn’t that what you wanted?”

Sirius grimaces but doesn’t move his gaze from Snape’s motionless form. Like he’s trying to convince himself it’s really there.

“We could wipe his memory.”

“Wipe his memory,” James repeats slowly, feeling cracked open. “You know how to do that do you?”

“I could figure it out,” he looks up at James, hopeful. “I know I could.”

James lets out an empty laugh, the noise bouncing around them in the dark. “And then what? It’ll be like it never happened? You going to wipe Remus’s memory too? Mine? Pete’s?”

Sirius's eyes go wide, his mouth opening helplessly without any sound coming out. Suddenly James is exhausted. He doesn't want to deal with this. Doesn't know how.

"It's illegal," he says finally, bending down to pick Snape up again. "I'm not going to Azkaban just so you don't have to deal with what a shitty person you are," he brushes past him and towards the castle.

"Where you taking him?" Sirius asks, jogging up beside him.

"Infirmary."

"James he'll talk, you know he will, and then Remus—"

"YES. I KNOW."

James has to stop again, struggling to keep himself contained, to keep himself from falling out of the holes torn in his skin. Sirius is looking at him with shocked eyes. James has never yelled at him like that before. He's not sure that he's ever yelled at anyone like that.

"I'm going to talk to Dumbledore," his voice trembles with the effort to remain steady. "He went through all the trouble of letting Remus in, he's not going to let Snape ruin that," he starts walking again. He can feel Snape's blood soaking into his shoulder.

"Okay—yeah, you might be right. I'll come with you."

"No."

"James—"

"I'm sorry, maybe I wasn't clear earlier. When I said stay the fuck away from him, I also meant stay the fuck away from me."

"James please, please I—I just wasn't thinking. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

"You just weren't thinking?" James demands. "You're unbelievable—you know it's going to break his heart right?" he stops again, turning to face Sirius fully. "I mean, it would have if it was any of us but that it was you—you," James's voice breaks and he grits his teeth in frustration. "It's going to destroy him when he finds out."

For a minute Sirius just stands there, looking small. And then; "I don't know why it matters that it was me," he says thinly.

James drops his head, letting out a long exhale. "Yeah," he says dryly, looking up again, "sure you don't." He turns around and keeps walking. He hears his name one more time but doesn't stop.

Poppy Pomfrey stands in front of him in a housecoat and slippers, hair braided down her back. Her wand currently providing the only light in the room.

“James Potter you better have a good reason for waking me up at—“ she pauses, squinting, “is that blood?” with one flick of her wand all the lamps in her office light and she steps forward, bringing her hands to his face, inspecting the damage.

“Is it bad? I haven’t seen it yet?”

“James what happened?” apparently, in her shock, last names have gone out the window.

“It’s a long story, listen,” he steps gently out of her grasp. “I’m fine, it’s—it’s Snape you need to look at.”

She blinks. “Snape? Severus Snape?”

James nods, leading her back out into the infirmary where he left Snape on one of the empty beds.

“Merlin,” she hisses under her breath, moving quickly to his side. “James what on earth happened to you?” her eyes are on the body in front of her, wand running up and down, casting so quickly James can’t keep track.

He sighs, sitting on the chair next to the bed and wiping at his bleeding nose. “He got in.”

“Got in?” she asks distractedly, muttering something over Snape’s head. He watches her wearily, hoping it looks worse than it is. That it’ll be an easy fix. Remus will never forgive himself otherwise.

“Yeah,” James croaks. “Yeah, he got into the shack.”

Her hands still. Her whole body stills really, eyes flicking up to meet his for the first time. “The shack?” she repeats.

James nods.

“He—Remus did this?”

“Not on purpose, but, yeah.”

He sees the fear in her eyes as they bounce back and forth between him and Snape, reassessing their injuries.

“He didn’t bite us.”

“You’re sure?”

James nods. “This was the stairs mostly,” he motions to himself.

“And Remus?” he knows that she cares for him. Maybe almost as much as James does.

“He’s still there, locked in. He’ll be okay—or, well—he’s not hurt too bad anyway, I don’t think. We didn’t have our wands.” James feels his stomach squirm but he pushes all thoughts

of how very not okay Remus is going to be out of his head. There are still hours until sunrise and if he thinks about it too much he'll lose it.

"You didn't have your wands," she repeats slowly, face paling, she just stares at him for a moment before eventually shaking her head. "I have to get the Headmaster and your Heads of House," she looks at him and then quickly waves her wand, James feels the tingling sensation of her diagnostic charms.

"You should be okay to wait, nothing severe," she starts moving away when James calls her back.

"He'll be alright?" he asks, gesturing to Snape.

She pauses a moment, and then nods. "A concussion, that's all. He'll have to take a potion in the morning for the next week and then he should be good as new."

James exhales, feeling his whole body relax.

Okay.

Well.

At least there's that.

"You did good James," she says, voice softening. A minute later he hears the infirmary door closing behind her.

James passes a hand over his face and winces as he brushes against the cuts on his cheek and forehead. He gives Snape a lingering look, hair now stuck to his face as the blood dries, robes covered in dust and dirt. He hates him. He's not sure if he's right to in this moment but he does. It's easier than hating Sirius.

Eventually he gets up, moving to a chair across the room so he doesn't have to look at him anymore. He leans his head back against the wall, closing his eyes. He hopes that Peter actually went into the shack and isn't just waiting outside the door. He hopes that him being there helps get Moony to relax. He hurts himself when he gets worked up—especially when he's trapped. He very determinedly doesn't think about Sirius. Or where he is. Or what he's going to say when he sees him next.

The numbness of before is wearing off, and everything aches and twinges. And he's tired. So fucking tired. He has to figure out what he's going to tell Remus—how he's going to stop him from reverting back to first year. To a boy who smiles politely but doesn't say much. Doesn't trust anyone enough to give any part of himself away.

"Potter?"

James blinks his eyes open, not remembering hearing anyone come in. The world is blurry for a minute, but slowly, a looming McGonagall comes into view, mouth pursed, tartan housecoat wrapped tightly around herself.

“Are you alright?” she asks, somehow managing to sound both concerned and brisk at the same time.

“Uh—sure,” he pulls himself up straighter, wincing at the tightness of his muscles. The infirmary is fully lit now, the curtains drawn around Snape’s bed. He must have fallen asleep.

Behind McGonagall are Dumbledore and Slughorn, both staring at James expectantly, while Pomfrey flits in and out in the background, moving between her office and Snape’s beside.

“Er—“ James doesn’t like where this is going at all.

“How, precisely,” McGonagall presses on, clearly not in the mood for smalltalk, “did you and Snape find yourselves in the shrieking shack?”

James blinks up at her.

Oh.

Right.

Questions.

“The whomping willow,” because he figures the more literal his answers are, the safer he’ll be.

She arches her eyebrow. “And how did you know that the tree was an entrance? ”

Remus, Remus told them. But James isn’t about to tell her that, so instead he shrugs. “Can’t remember.”

He thinks he hears Dumbledore chuckle in the background, but he can’t be sure.

“Really,” McGonagall says slowly, “you can’t remember?”

This is a time tested method of the marauders. When in doubt, amnesia is always an excellent defence. “Nope.”

“I see,” she exhales mightily. “And why, may I ask, were you trying to get into the shrieking shack at all?”

He meets her eyes, gaze steady. “I went to stop Snape.”

“To stop Snape? Stop him from what?”

Really? he thinks, is she really going to make me say it?

“Professor,” he says meaningfully, “he’s one of my best mates, we’ve shared a room for five years. You don’t think I’ve noticed that he always gets sick around the full moon?”

She looks more surprised by this revelation than he expected her to. Pomfrey, of course, now standing still in the background, does not appear the least bit shocked.

“For how long have you known about Lupin’s...condition.”

In for a penny, in for a pound; “Second year.” Not that he wasn’t bloody suspicious in first year, but if they were going by the first time they got Remus to admit to it, that was second year, just before Christmas.

“Is it sunrise yet?” James asks suddenly, even though he knows the interrogation isn’t over. He’s not sure how long he’s been asleep. He looks around McGonagall trying to see the window.

“Not yet,” Pomfrey offers. “Another hour still, than I’ll go get him.”

James nods, turning his attention to Dumbledore. “You have to protect him.”

“Potter—” McGonagall starts, but as much as he likes her, and he does, he’s not interested in manners or rules. Not right now.

He looks Dumbledore dead in the eye. “Snape is going to spread this around to who ever will listen, you have to stop him. You have to make sure that doesn’t happen.”

Dumbledore’s blue eyes twinkle in the candlelight. “I’ve protected him so far have I not?” he says after a brief pause.

“I don’t know,” James says, because he doesn’t. As far as he can tell, Remus has protected himself. “But I need your word that you’ll protect him now.”

He can feel Dumbledore’s attention like a hand on his shoulder, fingers digging in, squeezing, looking for something. But James doesn’t back down, doesn’t blink.

“You have it. Of course. Snape will be made well aware of the importance of Lupin’s privacy, and of what the consequences will be if he violates it.”

“Now, now Dumbledore,” Slughorn pipes up. “Lets not forget, Severus is the victim in all this.”

Dumbledore looks over at him, passively. “I daresay that there have been several victims tonight. Due largely to Snape’s curiosity.”

James nearly laughs at the look of outrage on Slughorn’s face.

“But how did he know about the shack?” McGonagall asks, bringing all eyes back to James.

He doesn’t know why he lies, stupid really, when Snape will no doubt rat Sirius out the moment he’s conscious. And honestly, serves Sirius right, he’s not interested in protecting him. Not this time. But for some reason he just can’t make himself...

“Sorry, I don’t know.”

McGonagall stares him down, as if expecting him to crack under the pressure of her disapproval. In fairness, he’s sure it’s worked for her in the past. But James doesn’t even

fidget.

“You can return to your room now Potter,” she says, eventually, “try to get some sleep.”

But James shakes his head. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“Remus will be in good hands James,” Dumbledore says calmly. “You have nothing to worry about.” He smiles, but James doesn’t smile back.

“With all due respect Sir,” he leans forward, clasping his hands between his knees, “one of my best friends just had to live through his worst nightmare. If you think there’s anyway I’m going to let him wake up alone you don’t know me very well.”

He feels the other three adults staring at him, a new tension falling over the room. James isn’t stupid, he knows who Dumbledore is—knows he’s much more than the headmaster of a school. He’s heard the things his parents have said. The way they look up to Dumbledore. And he does too, honestly, has the chocolate frog card and everything.

But he’ll fight him if he needs too.

Eventually Dumbledore smiles again. “Quite right,” he says, “Minerva, Horace,” he nods in the direction of Madame Pomfrey’s office, “a word.”

McGonagall does not look at all pleased about the way things have gone, but with one last look at James she allows herself to be herded away. Leaving him and Pomfrey alone again.

“Here,” she says, stepping closer, “lets do something about that face shall we?”

He nods, not paying much attention to the waves of magic that wash over him. Some of it hurts, but he registers it in a distant way, not really feeling it properly. Eyes staying, the whole time, on the brightening sky outside the window.

“Do you know what they’re talking about in there?” James asks after a while, nodding his head in the direction of her office.

Pomfrey makes a “tisking” noise. “No doubt trying to figure out how to keep the Ministry out of this.”

James snaps his head out of her hands. “The Ministry? Why would the Ministry get involved?”

She huffs, clearly unhappy to have her work interrupted. “Well, they like to keep a rather tight rein on...y’know...”

“Werewolves?”

She frowns.

“You can say it you know,” James pushes. “I don’t think it makes him feel better when people act like it’s a dirty word. It’s just—just a part of him that’s all. Not bad or good. Just there.”

He's worried, for a moment, that she's going to argue with him. He doesn't have much patience for people having a go at Remus on a good day. He certainly doesn't have the ability to handle it well right now.

"He's lucky to have you," she says eventually.

James lets that sit with him for a moment before he shrugs. "Actually, I think we're the ones lucky to have him."

She smiles softly at him, and together they watch the sun come up.

When Pomfrey comes back from the shack an hour later it's with an unconscious Remus floating beside her and James is up and at his side immediately.

"This isn't right," he says anxiously, keeping his voice down so that the others won't hear, "he should be awake."

Pomfrey sends him a side-long look as she folds back the covers of the nearest bed and lowers Remus into it.

"It used to happen a lot before."

"Before?"

She nods, tucking Remus in. "When he was younger it would take him quite a bit longer to wake up. Right up until the latter half of his second year I would say," she sends him a meaningful look across the bed. But James still doesn't understand.

"Why though?" he whispers, taking the chair beside Remus's bed.

She exhales, running her wand over him and fixing the smaller nicks and bruises before brushing the hair back from his forehead. "There's not much work that's been done on lycanthropy, but, from what I can tell, it helps if you want to wake up. Want to come back to yourself."

James isn't sure which part of that hurts more. The fact that eleven year old Remus didn't want to wake up. Or the fact that fifteen year old Remus doesn't want to wake up. Without thinking he reaches out and takes Remus's hand.

"Is he—" James swallows. "I had to hit him, to get away, is he—"

"He's alright, few bruised ribs, nothing he hasn't had before," which James knows is meant to be comforting but isn't at all.

"Right," he squeezes Remus's hand a little more tightly.

"Just give him time James," she says as she goes to leave, closing the curtains around them. James is glad that none of the others come in. Glad that when Remus wakes up he won't be

surrounded by a bunch of unwelcome faces.

It's strange thinking about it now, that Christmas in second year. James and Sirius had been certain for months but Peter still wasn't convinced.

"What if we're wrong?" he'd worried. "What if he gets offended?"

But all they'd cared about was being right—being clever enough, observant enough, to spot it. They tease Remus about being a swot but the truth is, it was James and Sirius who were obsessed with being the brightest, the most talented, top of the class. Who wanted to be seen. They hadn't once considered what it would mean for Remus, for people to know. Or how unfair it was, not to let him tell them himself.

The day before they were due to leave on Christmas break the four of them had been in their room packing. It had been Sirius's idea. Because of course it had.

"Oi, Remus," he'd called out, "wanna throw me the cufflinks on my dresser?"

Sirius had been sitting on his bed, mountains of clothes piled around him.

"I think that might be the poshest thing anyone's ever asked me," Remus laughed, missing the meaningful look exchanged between James and Sirius, Peter standing nervously by the window.

Almost as soon as he touched the cufflinks he recoiled. "Ow—what—" he clutched his hand to his chest, face going ashen as he looked at them more closely.

Silver.

They were silver.

James and Sirius thought they were so clever.

It made him feel a bit sick to think about it now. How triumphant they had felt. Look at us, they had thought, we figured it out!

"Something you want to tell us Remus?" Sirius had said grinning, while Remus stared between the three of them in horror.

"It was just static—they shocked me," he'd stuttered.

"C'mon, we're not that dim," James was off his bed at that point, leaning against the dresser next to Remus.

"We're right aren't we?" Sirius leaned forward. "Gone every full moon, can't touch silver, and the scars—"

"They aren't that noticeable," it had come out of him like a reflex, something Remus had no doubt spent his childhood being reassured of. An age old insecurity he was trying to talk himself out of. Not that James or Sirius picked up on it at the time.

“They’re wicked is what they are,” Sirius said.

For some reason, that hadn’t made Remus feel any better.

“Please,” he’d begged. “Please.”

And suddenly James has a horrible sense of de ja vu, having just heard that exact same plea echoing through the halls of the shrieking shack.

They had been young, only twelve, they couldn’t understand—couldn’t even begin to comprehend all that Remus had been through. All that he had to be afraid of. It had seemed fun to them—like a super power. A party trick. But they aren’t those kids anymore. They know better now—they’ve seen enough to know better. So how did this happen? How did they end up here?

“James?”

James opens his eyes, not realizing he had closed them in the first place, finding Remus wide-eyed and awake.

“James,” this time his name is a desperate sound. “Fuck—what happened? Snape—Snape was there—he—“

“Hey, hey,” James says gently, squeezing his hand. “It’s okay, everything is okay.” Which isn’t really true, but he’s not sure what else to say.

“He was there,” Remus says again, his voice a wrecked thing and he looks at James like he wants him to tell him he’s wrong. That he made it up. That none of it happened. And James wishes he could. More than anything.

“Yeah,” he says pointlessly. “Yeah Moons, he was there.”

Please. Please.

“He saw—he knows?”

James can hear voices on the other side of the curtains and silently begs the universe to just give them a little more time before the adults come in with their questions and accusations.

“He knows.”

Remus’s chest hitches and for a second James thinks he’s stopped breathing all together, but then he starts jerkily nodding his head. “Okay,” he says, sounding anything but, “okay, okay. So—so I’m going to have to—I’m going to have to leave,” he isn’t looking at James anymore. “That’s okay, I can take my OWLs at home, by post, and then—and then—I don’t know I’ll—I’ll get a job I guess—a Muggle job, where no one will know me and—and that’s okay. I can do that. I can—“

“Moons—Remus,” James yanks on his hand, pulling him back. “You’re not being expelled.”

“He’ll tell everyone James,” he uses his free hand to try and wipe away the tears now sneaking from his eyes, “and once he does they won’t let Dumbledore keep me here. It’s—but that’s okay. I never should have been here in the first place really. This was all a bit of a gift anyway.”

“Hey—no, stop that, none of that is happening okay? Remus—Remus look at me?”

And he does, with eyes that say he’s spent his life cutting away pieces of himself. Trying to carve out the person he thinks the world wants.

“I’ve talked to Dumbledore, he’s going to make sure Snape keeps his mouth shut, you’re not going anywhere, okay?”

Remus seems to swallow with difficulty. “Dumbledore said that?”

James nods, “he’s probably going to come through those curtains any minute and explain it to you himself,” James squeezes his hand again. “You’re not going anywhere okay? I promise.”

It takes a minute for that to sink in, for Remus to accept it, even a little bit, and James watches as he sits back against his Pillows.

“Snape’s okay?” he asks in a small voice.

“Completely fine I’m sorry to report.”

Remus doesn’t acknowledge the joke. “I didn’t—I didn’t hurt him—I didn’t hurt you?”

“Pushed us down the stairs but, other than that? Nah, you’re puppy really.”

Remus lets out a noise somewhere between a laugh and a sob. “Fuck James,” he finally pulls his hand free, bringing it up to his face. “How did this happen? How did he know?”

And oh how James has been dreading this question.

For some reason he can’t get Sirius’s face out of his head. The way he’d looked in second year when he’d thought of the cufflinks. And then somehow that smile turns into the one he’d had in the dorm room. All teeth. All pain. That’s always been the problem with Sirius Black. He’s all light or all dark with no in between.

“James?” Remus’s hands have fallen back into his lap, “You know don’t you?”

He wants to lie. He desperately wants to lie.

“Yeah,” it’s rough and frayed. He clears his throat. “Yeah I know. It—Sirius.” He has to force it out, because otherwise he doesn’t think he’ll ever be able to say it.

“What?” he can already hear the horror in Remus’s voice.

“Sirius told him—how to get past the tree.”

Please. Please.

Remus just stares at him, like maybe if he's still enough the words won't find him. And then he won't have to deal with it.

"But why—" his voice cracks and James can see him fighting tooth and nail to keep it together, "why would he do that?"

His voice is barely there, breathless, chest starting to heave again—short, jerky, inhales.

"Just breathe Remus okay? I need you to breathe?" but he doesn't think Remus is listening to him.

"Why would he do that?"

Please. Please.

James shakes his head, feeling helplessly cracked. "I don't know. I'm sorry Remus, I'm so sorry."

And James knows then, that he will never be able to hate Sirius Black.

Because he doesn't.

But oh how he wants to.

Chapter End Notes

Hello beautiful people!

I realize that for a Jegulus fic there was very little Regulus in this chapter but I promise our boy will be back next chapter.

Honestly, doesn't matter how many times I read it, The Prank gets me every time. Like the BETRAYAL. Sirius bb, please, why.

Thank you for your wonderful comments, hope you're having a great day / evening / night (it's late here idk if you can tell I am tireeeeeed)

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

James spends the day in the infirmary with Remus. They don't talk much. Peter brings their schoolwork and breakfast, stays for a while.

"Have you seen him?" James asks as Peter is leaving, they walk away from Remus's bed, talking quietly by the door.

Peter nods. "He's in the room. He asked about Remus—he wanted to come but I—I thought it would be a bad idea."

James nods. "Thanks."

"See you at dinner?" Peter asks hopefully.

"Maybe," he pats him on the shoulder before heading back to Remus, whose been burying himself in a history book for the last hour.

"Moons?" he asks tentatively, leaning against the end of the bed.

Remus's eyes flick up briefly before dropping back down. "Mm?" Everything about his posture is closed off, since their conversation this morning he's been nearly silent. James doesn't blame him, not at all, but he hates it.

"I just have to do something real quick, but I'll be back soon okay?"

There's silence and then Remus sighs. "You don't have to be here James," he says quietly, eyes not lifting from the page in front of him.

"I know, but I want to be."

They've already had this conversation several times this morning and James doesn't think that either of them feels like getting into it again.

"I'll be back," he repeats, and this time Remus just nods his head.

Before he makes it out of the infirmary he casts a look at the bed a few paces away. According to Pomfrey Snape is awake now. James knows that he's talked to Dumbledore, knows that he told them all that Sirius was the one who told him about the whomping willow, which, of course, led to James being interrogated again.

He feels a bit wary of leaving Remus alone with him, even knowing Pomfrey is just in her office and that Snape hasn't got his wand back yet. This won't take long though, and if he wants to do it he has to go now. So, reluctantly, he pushes through the door and into the corridor.

Pomfrey told Remus he was well enough to return to the dorms if he wanted to. He didn't. James wasn't surprised, and he doesn't blame him. He doesn't want to go back there either if he's being honest. But he can't have Remus hiding out in the infirmary for the rest of the year.

"Professor?" James says, tentatively knocking on the open door to McGonagall's office.

She looks up from the paperwork on her desk, brows drawing together at the sight of him. "Potter?"

He steps further into the room. "Can I talk to you for minute?"

She only pauses briefly before gesturing to the seat in front of her. He sits on the edge, not intending to get comfortable. He doesn't want to be here long. She leans forward across her desk, fingers weaving together as she waits patiently for him to continue.

"Is Sirius going to be expelled?" for some reason those words feel like nails being dragged up his throat. He wouldn't fight it, if it happened. It would be right after what he's done. But the thought still breaks his heart. They've always been together, the four of them, ever since they first met. And if he's being honest, James has never thought that would change. Not as they got older, or left Hogwarts. It felt like this unquestionable law of the universe—the marauders belonged together. Always.

"I'm afraid it is not my place to discuss that with you," McGonagall says after a long pause.

James nods. He'd been expecting that, but he figured he'd try anyway.

"Well if he isn't," he presses on. "I think he should be moved to a new dorm." He says it very matter of fact, like it doesn't shred him on the inside. He can't really think about it. About what he's asking. Because if he does he won't do it.

"I see," McGonagall says carefully. "It is not...commonplace, to remove students from their dorms."

"This isn't exactly a common situation though, is it?"

She dips her head in acknowledgement but doesn't say anything else.

James sighs. "Look, it isn't fair to Remus—to make him have to face him like that, have to see him every day. He deserves to feel safe, and how will he ever feel safe if he has to share a room with the person who—" "Betrayed him? Lied to him? Used him? Broke his heart? James isn't sure how to best sum up what Sirius did.

McGonagall nods slowly. "I'll see what I can do, there are no more available beds, but if I can find someone willing to switch with him would that be acceptable to you?"

"Yes," James says quickly, even though the thought makes his stomach clench. Having someone else in their room. In Sirius's bed. "Yes that would be acceptable."

"Good."

He gets out of his chair, anxious to get back to Remus. “You’re still with Mr. Lupin in the infirmary I imagine?” McGonagall says as he turns to leave.

“Er—yeah?”

She nods. “Best that you stay there. The parents will be arriving soon.”

James’s heart plummets into his stomach. “The parents?”

An hour later James finds himself in Dumbledore’s office with Remus, Sirius and Snape. It is maybe the most awkward he has ever felt in his entire life. None of them speak—none of them even look at each other. Sirius is sunk low in his chair, eyes on the floor, a sick expression on his face. Snape sitting rim-rod straight, face pale, eyes unwavering on the Headmaster. James separates them from Moony, whom he sneaks glances at every few seconds. But Remus’s face is unreadable. Wiped clean of the pain of this morning. And while he understands why, part of James wants to tell him to drop it—let them see, let them see how much fucking damage they’ve done.

As much as he was dreading the arrival of the parents, it’s almost a relief when McGonagall opens the door. The tension was starting to make his skin itch.

“Boys,” his mum is the first one through, dressed in muggle clothing—she usually is when she’s at home—blue jeans, white floral blouse. He’s sure Snape will be bringing that up at some point.

“Mum,” James doesn’t know if he should stand up or not, but his mother doesn’t really give him the chance. She’s almost instantly in front of them.

“Remus love,” she kisses the top of his head, “alright?” she asks softly.

James can see him swallow. “Yes, Mrs. Potter.”

“It’s Effie darling,” she kisses his head one more time before moving on to James, the other parents still filing in, somewhat less determinedly than Euphemia Potter. She takes his face in her hands kissing him as well. Of course. On the forehead. The cheek. The top of his mess of hair.

“Mum,” he says, exasperated. Except that, the truth is, he’s so glad she’s here. Now that he can feel her and see her. Glad that someone else can take control of the situation, because James honestly doesn’t know what to do with it.

His mother presses here forehead to his. “You’re okay?” she asks, in the same soft voice she used on Remus. James wonders if it’s actually some kind of spell, the way it calms him down instantly.

“Yeah—yeah, I’m okay.”

She nods, forehead rubbing against his as she pulls away. James isn't sure if he was expecting Walburga to come or not, but she isn't there. Snape's mother is—a mousy woman with brown hair and nervous eyes. And the Lupins, coming to stand at their son's side, Hope looking nervous, whispering something in Remus's ear, Lyall looking—tired. James assumes Fleamont is at work.

“Oh Sirius,” he hears his mother coo, turning to see her crouched in front of his best friend, trying to meet his eye. It takes James a moment to realize that Sirius is crying and trying desperately to hide it. “It's okay, sweetheart, it's okay. We'll sort it out, I promise.”

Sirius just shakes his head, letting out a shaky breath as he quickly wipes his eyes on his sleeve. James is angry and sad at the same time and he isn't at all sure what to do with that. Mostly he wishes his mother would stop acting like all Sirius did was break a dish or cheat on a test. Instead of put two peoples lives at risk.

Dumbledore clears his throat and Euphemia stands, moving to stand behind their chairs, one hand on Sirius and one on James.

“You've all been informed of what transpired last night,” McGonall is standing beside him.

“Does the Minister know you keep a werewolf at this school?” Mrs. Snape has a high reedy voice, and James clenches his teeth.

“They don't keep him Eileen,” Euphemia answers before Dumbledore can. “He's a student, he attends Hogwarts just like everyone else.” Her voice is light but there is an undeniable sharpness to her words.

“Leave it Effie,” James hears Lyall mutter beside them, which almost makes James angrier. Remus looks as though he's trying to cave-in on himself.

“It would seem,” Dumbledore presses on, “that Sirius and Severus took a game of chicken a bit too far.”

“I didn't know there was going to be a werewolf in there,” Snape says sulkily.

James thinks if someone refers to Remus as “a werewolf” one more time, he's going to lose it.

Dumbledore's cool blue eyes fall on the Slytherin. “That's true. You did know, however, that both the willow and the shack were off-limits, correct?”

Snape scowls. “Yes.”

“And, do forgive me, but while Mr. Black did not tell you exactly what you were walking into, I do believe he made it clear that it wasn't a surprise party, correct?”

Snape doesn't answer this time, just glares.

“Therefore you did make the decision to enter into a dangerous situation, even if you were not entirely aware of how dangerous it was in order to—prove yourself to Mr. Black?”

Snape scoffs. “I don’t need to prove anything to him.”

Dumbledore smiles. “To satisfy your own curiosity then. Either way, while Mr. Black certainly enticed you, he did not force you to do anything, or am I mistaken?”

There are several long seconds of silence before Snape finally answers, “that’s correct.”

“I am glad we can all agree,” there is something slightly off about Dumbledore’s cheerfulness—something dangerous—that makes the hair stand-up on the back of James’s neck. “Then you will understand why I have decided to take a hundred points from Slytherin,” Snape’s mouth literally falls open, “and give you detention with Professor McGonagall every weekend for the rest of term.”

“This is ridiculous!” his mother sparks up again. “That thing attacked my son!” she points a bony finger in Remus’s direction.

James moves to stand, ready to take this woman apart, but his mother pushes him back down.

“I’ll kindly ask you not to refer to my students as ‘things’ Eileen,” McGonagall says coldly.

“And I’ll ask less kindly,” Euphemia adds, earning her a barely repressed smirk from McGonagall.

“Yes, I think you will find this is still my school Mrs. Snape,” Dumbledore seems unfazed by all of this. “If you disagree with my methods, feel free to remove your son from the premises.”

James sees the sudden fear in Snape’s eyes and he grabs hold of his mother’s wrist just as she opens her mouth to speak again. “Leave it mum, please, it’s fine.”

She looks down, seemingly startled that her son has spoken to her, and then back up at Dumbledore. “Fine,” she hisses, crossing her arms over her chest. “But I want it known that I think it is absolutely barbaric that—“

“Yes, yes, we’ve noted you,” Euphemia cuts her off. “You’re outnumbered Eileen, bow out gracefully.”

James thinks there is a very good chance that Snape’s mum is going to combust. Her face somehow manages to grow even more pinched, her high cheeks flushing a bright and unattractive red.

Once again, Dumbledore appears unbothered by the squabbling. “Excellent,” his gaze moves onto Sirius. “Now, Mr. Black, this whole situation does seem to start with you, doesn’t it?”

Sirius says nothing, head still down, which makes James somehow angrier. He shoots a a worried look over at Remus, who’s sitting with his shoulders rolled in, like he’s trying to pull as far away from his parents as he can without actually getting out of his chair, eyes very determinedly on his hands. James hopes Dumbledore puts them all out of their misery soon because this was really the last thing Moony needed.

“It has been decided that you will remain at school—“

“I’m not being expelled?” Sirius croaks. The first words he’s spoken.

“No,” Dumbledore says softly, “but you will be removed from the Gryffindor quidditch team.”

That hits James surprisingly hard. Maybe because he hadn’t really thought that far ahead. Thought of what the day to day was going to look like after this.

“And you will be serving detentions for the remainder of the term, like Mr. Snape, with Professor McGonagall. I will also be taking a hundred points from Gryffindor,” Sirius swallows, nodding along to all of this, face pale. “And you will be moving dorms.”

“What?” Sirius looks like he didn’t mean to let the word out, and James’s eyes shoot to McGonagall who gives him a slight nod.

“After the events of last night it has been deemed inappropriate for you to continue to share a dorm with Mr. Lupin, so Frank Longbottom has agreed to switch with you.”

James does his best not to be bitter about the fact that this means Sirius will be getting his own room. The alternative would be Moony switching with Frank and, if he’s honest, the last thing he wants is for Remus to be isolated.

“I have to leave my room?” Sirius says, somewhere between dazed and heart broken.

James makes a scoffing noise that earns him a squeeze from his mother’s hand but he doesn’t care. He feels Sirius’s eyes on him but refuses to feel bad. Moony could have died. He could have killed Snape—which honestly, for Remus, would have been worse.

“Yes,” McGonagall answers Sirius after a brief pause, “for the safety of everyone involved.”

“You think I’m unsafe?” Sirius’s voice breaks.

“Surely, that isn’t necessary,” Euphemia speaks up.

“The hell it isn’t!”

“James.”

But he’s had just about enough of listening to a bunch of people who have no idea what they’re talking about, acting like they have any right to decide what happens here.

“He put Remus at risk—he could have been hurt, Snape had his wand on him when I got there,” James feels something slightly hysterical clawing at his chest, like everything he couldn’t feel last night is bubbling to the surface. He’s always loved the way his mother takes care of everyone, the way she protects Sirius. But there are things that are unforgivable. Maybe James doesn’t hate Sirius, but he sure as hell doesn’t like him very much.

“These are peoples’s lives we’re talking about,” he looks at Sirius for the first time, and the other boy stares back, eyes wide. “They aren’t fucking toys—they don’t exist for your

amusement.”

“James—“ his mother tries again, but it’s too late, he’s on a roll.

“I mean, house points?” he turns to Dumbledore. “Detention? This is a fucking joke.”

“What would you suggest James?” Dumbledore asks calmly.

“Anything—something—this isn’t—this is a crime. You can’t just allow them to treat people like this.”

“James—“ Euphemia tries to calm her son down for the third time.

“You weren’t there!” he’s never shouted at her before. “You weren’t there, you didn’t have to —“ his voice falls to pieces in his mouth. “You weren’t there.” He closes his eyes for a second, trying to get a hold of all the feelings forcing their way to the surface. Trying to rip his skin apart.

“It must have been very scary for you,” Dumbledore says eventually, “to find your friend in such a vulnerable position.”

James exhales, and after several seconds forces his eyes to open again. “You know what was scary, Professor?” he says, as flatly as he can manage. “Watching my best mate smile while he told me what he’d done.”

A pained noise comes from Sirius but James ignores it.

“McGonagall was right, it is safer for all of us if he’s on his own.”

His mother squeezes his shoulder but doesn’t bother objecting again. There’s an eery silence now, and James almost regrets freaking out on everyone, except that he can’t quite shake the feeling that they deserved it.

“The Lupins have agreed not to press charges,” Dumbledore goes on eventually.

“They’ve decided not to press charges?” Eileen interjects. “It’s MY son whose been attacked here.”

“As we already discussed,” Dumbledore goes on in an extraordinarily patronizing tone.

“Since your son quite knowingly put himself in danger, you would hardly have a case.”

She makes an affronted noise but Dumbledore’s attention has already returned to Remus.

“Given all that has happened, we’ve told your parents that you are more than welcome to go home for a period of time, to rest, recover.”

James sees Remus stiffen in his chair. “No,” he says almost too quickly. “I— I want to stay. I want to be here. Please.”

Hope worries her bottom lip, fingers fidgeting with her sleeve. “Are you sure Rem? It might be good for—”

“He said he didn’t want to,” Lyall cuts his wife off, sounding more tired than anything else. “Stop fussing over him and leave it be.”

Dumbledore is still focused on Remus. “You’re sure that’s what you want?” he asks him.

“It is,” still without hesitation.

“Very well, then the last order of business is to collect the memory from James.”

James blinks. “I—er—what?”

“The Ministry, while agreeing to allow us to handle this internally, needs confirmation that the events occurred as we have described—that Mr. Lupin was in fact safely secured,” James sees Remus flinch out of the corner of his eye. “And that there was no unprovoked attack, and no mauling of you or Mr. Snape. Since you are the only witness to the entirety of last night’s events, your memory is needed.”

Remus, once again, curls in on himself. James grits his teeth.

“Okay. Fine. Whatever.”

His mother squeezes his shoulder. “I’ll be right here,” she says comfortingly.

“The rest of you are free to go, Professor McGonagall will show you out.”

James hears the others shuffling, chairs being pushed back, floorboards squeaking, but he isn’t looking at them. He’s looking at Dumbledore, who pulls out a vial and places it on the desk in front of him. Now that the room is empty, there is suddenly space for James’s fear, and he feels it creeping up his spine, pricking his heart.

“Will it hurt?” he asks, eyes still on the vial.

“No,” Dumbledore says calmly.

James nods, getting to his feet and walking forward, he can feel his mother following behind him as he picks up the glass tube, cold in his hands.

“Will they be able to hear my thoughts—what I was thinking when it happened?” the thought makes a vaguely sick feeling wash over him—a bunch of Ministry lackeys listening to him run around, terrified.

“No,” Dumbledore says again. “They will view the memory as third party observers. The perspective change is part of what makes the pensieve so useful.”

James swallows, throat dry as he pulls out his wand. He looks up at Dumbledore one last time. “Will I forget? Once it’s out of me?”

Dumbledore takes his time now, eyes running James over. James used to think that those blue eyes were kind, safe, but these last few hours he's looked at them too many times to believe that anymore. There's something underneath the playfulness. Something cold and calculated. It makes James shiver.

"Would you like that?" he asks finally, not answering James's question.

"Albus," he hears his mother warn from behind them, but Dumbledore doesn't take it back, his stare doesn't falter.

"I don't know," James answers truthfully. "No, I guess. I wish it hadn't happened, but since it did, I'd rather know."

Dumbledore smiles softly. "Ignorance is peace, but knowledge is freedom."

James stares back at him blankly and eventually Dumbledore chuckles to himself.

"You won't forget," he goes on. "It may—fade slightly, feel less vibrant, but it will still be there."

"Okay," James brings the tip of his wand to his temple. "Good."

It does hurt.

Dumbledore is a dirty liar.

Or maybe it isn't the spell. Maybe it's just the memory.

The night before runs through him at double speed. And he feels every second of it. Every scratch. Every crack in his heart. Every scream out of Moony's mouth. It tears itself from him violently, and unwillingly. Claws digging in as he attempts to pour it into the vial, his hands shaking.

I told him how to get past the tree.

Please, please.

A werewolf? The freak is a werewolf?

James.

James.

James please, please I—I just wasn't thinking. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry.

He nearly drops it, gasping as the last of the night bleeds out of him. His mother instantly steps forward, placing the vial on Dumbledore's desk before wrapping James in her arms.

"It's okay my love, you were so brave," she murmurs into the top of his head, placing kisses between her words. It's not until then that James realizes his cheeks are wet—that he's been

crying.

“I’m okay,” he says, though his voice is all over the place when it comes out of his mouth.

“Thank you James,” Dumbledore places a stopper in the top of the vial before sliding it into a small wrack on his desk. “Very helpful.”

“Oh well,” his mother say bitterly. “As long as he could be helpful to you.”

Dumbledore doesn’t respond to her and James wonders if she speaks to him like this often. If this is what they’re like, when they close all those doors in his face.

“I’ll give you two some privacy,” Dumbledore says eventually, stepping out from behind his desk, indigo robes fluttering behind him. “Feel free to take as long as you need.”

Euphemia is still holding James, he should probably feel embarrassed by that but he doesn’t. He should probably step away but he doesn’t do that either. He hadn’t realized how much he needed this until now.

“I’m okay,” he says again, though he doesn’t know who he’s trying to comfort.

“I know baby,” she gives him another squeeze before pulling back enough to hold his face, thumbs wiping away the tears he doesn’t remember shedding. “I love you, you know that?”

James nods. “Yeah I know, I love you too.”

“Good,” she pulls him forward, kissing the top of his head before letting go.

They stand still for a minute, James wiping his nose on his sleeve. “I don’t know if I can forgive him for this,” he says finally, voice rough.

His mother nods sadly. “I know you don’t.”

“And I don’t know how you can brush it off.”

“I’m not brushing it off,” she says firmly. “It was horrible what he did James, I know that. But I also know a broken person when I see them. I can’t imagine me shouting at him would have done much.”

James isn’t sure he agrees. “Where’s Walburga?” he asks instead of arguing.

His mother looks surprised. “Walburga? Why would she be here?”

“She’s his mother,” James says, though the words taste bitter in his mouth.

Euphemia watches him for a moment before nodding, slowly. “She is. But she’s not his guardian. Not since last summer.”

It isn’t surprising. James doesn’t know why it hadn’t occurred to him before. “Oh,” he says dumbly. “You and dad?”

“Yes.”

A beat of silence. “Did—how did you do that?”

His mother lets out a sigh, leaning back against Dumbledore’s desk. “We asked for custody and Walburga and Orion gave it to us.”

Another fact that shouldn’t surprise him as much as it does. “They just...gave him away? Just like that?”

She grimaces. “I’d appreciate it if you didn’t put it to Sirius like that, but yes, more or less.”

“I’m not talking to Sirius,” he says, because it’s the only thing he can think to say, his stomach squeezing at the idea that anyone could treat their child so casually. Like they were disposal.

“Right well, when you start to again—“

“You’re so certain I will?” his voice sounds sharp even to his own ears, but she only smiles softly at him.

“Yes. I am,” and when James only scowls she goes on. “I’ve watched you two since you were eleven years old James. You fit together so well—so beautifully. Oh and when you came back after first year,” she smiles more fully now. “The looks on your little faces when you had to say goodbye. You cried the whole way home, do you remember?”

“I was a kid. I cried over loads of dumb stuff,” he says defensively.

Euphemia shakes her head. “Not like this. As soon as we got home the first thing you did was write to him. Wrote to him every day that summer.”

James runs a hand through his hair, not appreciating this particular walk down memory lane. “We aren’t those people anymore.”

“Maybe,” she allows, “but it wouldn’t hurt this bad, if you didn’t love him.”

His mother, he firmly believes, is an expert in Legilimency. The way she cuts right through everything. Striking at your core.

“Sometimes,” James’s voice breaks but he forces himself to go on; “I feel like I’m lying to everyone.”

“Lying about what?” she asks softly.

He almost laughs. “Everything. People look at me like I’m supposed to know what I’m doing and I have no idea. I want to do—you know—the right thing. Mostly. Most of the time. And I used to be so sure I knew what that was, but now...” If you had asked him a day ago if there was anyone on the planet he trusted more than Sirius Black he would have answered without hesitating. No.

No one.

He's the best person I know.

The bravest.

The strongest.

No.

If you had asked him a day ago if Sirius would ever use Remus as a prop—to get back at Snape or because of some petty bullshit some guy said to him in a fight—he would have had an answer for you too. No question.

And he would have been wrong.

“Mostly,” he goes on, after a long pause. “I feel like I’m just treading water, like I’m barely keeping my head above the tide. And I keep waiting to grow up. Everyone wants me to. To be better. And I want that too, I do. So I just—I wait. Wait for the day that I don’t feel like everything is too big. Cause somehow life got so big, and I still feel so fucking small.”

“Oh honey,” his mother reaches out, brushing a hand through his hair, “the truth is, no one knows what they’re doing. We’re all just trying our best. I’m afraid that feeling never really goes away.”

James lets out a dry laugh. “Well, that’s depressing.”

“Yeah, a bit,” she admits. “But it also means you can cut yourself some slack. You’re only fifteen James. And you’re doing wonderfully, considering the circumstances.”

“Pretty sure you have to say that, as my mum.”

She smiles, pulling him into a hug. “I don’t, actually. If you were being a little shit I’d let you know, believe me.”

James snorts into her shoulder, squeezing her back, trying to soak up as much comfort as he can.

“Thank you for coming,” he doesn’t know why he says it, like she wasn’t summoned, like she had a choice. Still, he means it.

“I’ll always come for you James,” she says, chin resting on the top of his head. “I promise.”

When he walks into his dorm room everything is just as it was when he left. It’s not surprising, nothing happened here, there’s no reason for it to be any different, and yet it feels insulting almost, that it should be so untouched when everything else is unravelling.

There are no lights on, the blue of the summer evening the only thing lighting the space, and so it takes him a minute to realize that, actually, everything is not exactly the same. Sirius's clothes have gone from the floor. The trunk missing from the end of his bed. The records his uncle gave him gone. James stands, frozen, staring at the empty holes now suddenly so painfully obvious to him, and feels a wave of mourning crash against his ribs.

"You're back."

He looks behind him and finds Remus standing in front of the washroom, door closing behind him.

James nods. "Pete?"

"Great Hall."

"Shit, is it dinner already?"

Remus nods, walking slowly forward to stand next to James, both of them at the foot of Sirius's bed. Like a blackhole in the centre of the room, drawing them in. All James can think is—it was never supposed to be this way—which just drags all his anger back to the surface. Because fuck Sirius. Fuck him for doing this to them.

Beside him Remus lets out a shaky breath, shoving his hands into his pockets. James looks over at him but Remus keeps his eyes on the bed, even when he starts speaking.

"He kissed me," those words are big. They have weight. They take up space.

He watches Remus for a few more seconds before moving to sit on the end of the bed, facing him. Listening.

"He was upset," Remus goes on eventually. "You'd been hit by the bludger, you were still in the infirmary and he was upset and I was trying to comfort him and he kissed me," Remus screws up his face, pulling his mouth to the side, and James can tell that he's trying not to cry. "And I kissed him back," those words are barely a sound, so quiet and delicate James worries if he listens too closely they'll break. "I took advantage of him."

"Remus," he says softly, but his friend shakes his head.

"I should have stopped it, I should have pushed him away but I just—" his mouth hangs there for a moment, words unable or unwilling to come out. "I just wanted him—I've wanted him for so long."

James wonders how it is that he never noticed it, not until this year, not until everything started to fall apart. How could he have been so clueless? So self involved that he couldn't see what was growing between two of the most important people in his life?

"He didn't—react well," Remus says finally, voice choked. "We stopped talking...for a bit."

"I noticed."

Remus nods, still talking more to the bed than to James. “But then things, recently, they’ve been...better. He’s been so—“ his voice cuts out again and it’s several moments of silence before he gets it back again. “I don’t know, affectionate?”

James nods. “Yeah. I noticed that too.”

Remus makes a noise, something between a laugh and a sob. “Good, I’m glad someone else did,” he closes his eyes briefly. “Worried it was all in my head.”

“It wasn’t.”

He nods slowly, a grimace shooting across his face, like he’s in pain. “Do you think—“ his voice is thick, eyes still closed. “Do you think that’s why he did it?”

It takes a minute for the full meaning of Remus’s words to hit him, and when they do they’re a punch to his gut.

“No. No, Remus, no way.”

“You didn’t see his face—after we kissed—you didn’t see,” he takes in a shaky breath, opening his eyes, wet and shinning in the dim light. “No one’s ever looked at me like that before,” a horribly sad laugh comes out of his mouth. “And I’m a werewolf.”

Every word pulls and yanks and drags James down low.

“Or maybe that was it,” Remus’s voice is steady, but James can see the tears making their way down his face. “Maybe he wasn’t upset that he’d kissed a boy. Maybe he was upset that he kissed a fucking wolf.”

“Stop,” James says—begs. “Remus stop, none of that is true. He doesn’t think like that,” even as James says it he can so clearly see Sirius lying on this bed, smiling.

We have a fucking werewolf.

“You sure about that?” Remus looks at him properly for the first time and it aches.

“Yes,” because two days ago I told him I was seeing a boy and he hugged me and said I was his brother. Because I saw the pain in his eyes when you walked away from him at Christmas. Because I saw the way he looked at you yesterday, when he thought no one else could see.

James leaves too much unsaid. He knows it. But for some reason none of those words can make it out of him.

Remus opens his mouth at the same time that there’s rustling at the door. He quickly brings his hands to his face, scrubbing the tears away before he turns back to the bathroom.

“I’m going to take a shower,” he says over his shoulder, the door to the dorm room opening.

“Remus—“ but it’s too late, he’s already disappeared into the other room, shower humming.

James sighs, running a hand over his face, turning around, expecting to see Peter and instead finding Frank, dragging his trunk with one hand and holding a box of stuff in the other.

“Oh,” James says dumbly, staring at the older boy.

“Hello to you too.”

James quickly jumps out of his way as he struggles over, dumping his box of stuff onto Sirius’s bed. He huffs, hands on his hips as he looks around.

“Bit dark in here isn’t it?”

James smiles grimly, moving to sit on his own bed. “Yeah, a bit.”

Frank flicks his wand, lighting the lamps, eyes trailing over the beds surrounding him. “Well, privacy was nice while it lasted.” He shoots James a look as he bends over and starts riffling through his stuff. “Heads up, Alice will be coming up here from time to time.”

James snorts, this conversation feeling so out of place after the one he was just having. “Just close your curtains yeah? And use a silencing charm or something.”

“Obviously, we’re not barbarians.”

James barely manages a smile. Sitting there watching Frank unpack—putting his pictures on Sirius’s nightstand, his clothes in Sirius’s drawers—some childish part of himself wants to throw a fit. No don’t touch that, it shouts, it’s not yours.

“Hey, thanks for doing this,” James says eventually, rubbing awkwardly at the back of his neck.

Frank sends him a sidelong look as he places his jumpers neatly in a drawer. Remus will at least get the orderly roommate he’s always wanted.

“I said no at first,” he says eventually.

“Oh yeah?”

Frank nods. “Told McGonagall it was a lost cause. That you’d tear the school apart before you let someone take Black from you.”

James tries to swallow but his throat has grown too tight. “What changed your mind?” he croaks.

“She told me it was your idea,” he pauses in his unpacking, eyes meeting James’s. “That’s how I knew.”

“Knew?”

He nods, “That whatever happened, it was serious.”

They're still for a moment, and James waits for the questions that ought to follow that—the what happened? What could be so bad? What did he do? But they don't come. Eventually Frank goes back to his unpacking.

"I figured, if something that bad happened, that was probably more important than me having my own room."

James has always looked up to Frank. As an only child, he had no older siblings to emulate, to chase after. There was his dad, but, that was different. Plus, Fleamont had a tendency to go places James couldn't follow. Then he came to Hogwarts and he met Frank. When they were first years he was a third year, which at the time felt like a big deal—felt old. He was one of the youngest members on the Gryffindor quidditch team and even then he had been bloody brilliant. James remembers watching him and thinking—me, that's going to be me, I'm going to be just like that.

On top of that, Frank was just...nice. He was always there, if you got lost or forgot the password, he never seemed frustrated or exasperated like some of the other older kids. Even before he became Prefect or Head Boy, he would go out of his way to help people. He never made a show of it. Frank didn't want attention, never seemed to know what to do with it once he got it.

"Thanks," James finds himself saying again.

Frank looks up from the trousers he'd been folding. He pauses for a moment, before finally speaking. "Of course, if you—you need to talk James, you let me know yeah?"

James nods, stomach tightening because he knows that he can't—couldn't—even if he wanted to. "Sure," voice strained, he coughs, trying to clear it away; "Sure, yeah, I will."

He waits for Remus, but when he doesn't come out of the bathroom after an hour James takes the hint and goes down to the Great Hall alone. He wonders if this is what it's going to be like from now on. The three of them orbiting around each other, polite but distanced. He wonders if there are things that can't be fixed. If change actually isn't gradual but fast and sharp and violent. He wonders if he should have just let Sirius wipe their memories.

When he walks into the Come and Go Room Regulus is sitting on one of the sofas. It hasn't been that long since they last saw one another but it feels like ages and James's heart does something weird in chest as he stops by the door, grey eyes holding him still.

"Listen," Regulus starts, that familiar determination in his voice. He stands up but doesn't come closer, a full room between them. "I know you're angry about what happened yesterday."

James almost laughs. Because, of course, Regulus has no idea what happened yesterday.

“I know I went too far, I do,” he goes on, and for the first time in hours, James feels his body relax. Because he’s here, with Reg, here in their space. Because Regulus’s voice is steady and familiar and he’s been craving it all day. Desperate to find something to ease the anxiety growing in his stomach. And here it is. Because of course it is. Of course it’s him.

“—and Evan and Barty,” James blinks, realizing that Regulus has been speaking this whole time. His face is scrunched, serious, “they were out of line—way out of line. They’re assholes honestly, but, their parents are friends with my mum so I can’t really—it’s complicated.”

It isn’t that he’s not mad. About all of it. About everything that happened in that hallway. It’s just that he can’t feel it right now. Doesn’t have the space for anymore anger or betrayal. Maybe it’s because he hasn’t slept at all or because everything in his life seems to be falling apart, but all he feels when he looks at Regulus is warmth and home and it’s so...nice. After everything that’s happened, he just wants to hold onto that.

“James?” Regulus asks, bringing James’s drifting mind back to the present. He really does need to get some sleep. “I am sorry, I didn’t—I mean he followed me into the corridor and I swear I tried to walk away but he wasn’t having it. He just kept—”

“I love you.”

Regulus’s mouth abruptly slams shut, eyes growing wide, the room suddenly very quiet. There’s a long moment of stillness, in which neither of them seems quite able to deal with what James has just thrown into the middle of the room, but eventually, the older boy breaks.

“I don’t want to fight with you,” his voice is scratchy when he speaks again. “I’m tired and I’m—I’m having a really, really shitty day and I just—I need you,” he tries not to wince at the whine in his voice. “I just need you—is that—is that okay?”

Regulus is staring at him, stalk still, grey eyes blinking. “Say it again.”

James laughs roughly. “Which part?”

“You know which part.”

He swallows, he doesn’t know why he suddenly feels nervous when he’s already said it. “I love you Regulus.”

It surprises him when Regulus moves, closing the space between them in record time. Suddenly his mouth is on James’s and he can’t hold back the noise that it pulls from him. Needy, is the only word that comes to mind. Regulus has his hand on the back of James’s neck, bringing him to his level, mouth opening him up, warm and sweet and...safe. When James regains control of his body he wraps his arms around Regulus, pulling him closer, until there’s no space between their bodies, and still, somehow, it isn’t close enough.

His hands move down, down Regulus back, his sides, slipping under his thighs and lifting him up, Regulus’s legs wrapping automatically around his waist.

“Stupid jock,” Regulus mutters into his mouth and James laughs. It feels good. It all feels so fucking good, and he’s starving for it. For something that doesn’t ache. That doesn’t feel like treading water. When Regulus’s hands are on him he can breathe.

He stumbles towards the bed, spilling Regulus onto his back and holding himself above. The other boy blinks up at him, eyes bright and reaching into him, pulling on his chest, squeezing the air out of his lungs. It isn’t new, feeling overwhelmed by this. By him. But James is raw tonight, and all of the sudden looking at Regulus under him is too much. Because he wants him. He wants him here, like this, always.

Except didn’t last night prove that he can’t have that? That you can’t keep people—they’re too hard to hold. That everyone slips through your fingers eventually, no matter how much you love them.

“James?” Regulus says softly, reaching up to press his hand to James’s face.

“Sorry,” his voice is ragged. “Sorry, I’m a bit of a mess right now.” He drops his head, forehead resting against Regulus’s.

“Good to know you’re human.”

James goes to laugh but it gets trapped in his throat.

“You wanna tell me what happened?”

“Yes,” he’s whispering, like that’ll make it easier, “but I can’t.”

Regulus’s thumb brushes against his cheek before his hand slowly trails down to James’s chest, gently pushing him down onto the bed. They lie facing one another.

“I’m sorry,” James says again but Regulus just shakes his head.

“You don’t have to apologize to me,” he leans forward, pressing a quick kiss to James’s mouth. Sweet. Innocent. It makes something in James sing.

They just lie there for a minute, James trying to work out what the hell is going on with him, and Regulus just waiting. Eventually the younger boy reaches out, running his hand through James’s hair and James closes his eyes, leaning into the touch.

“Sirius—hurt—someone,” the words are choked when they finally come out of him. Because he has to tell someone. Someone who isn’t directly involved. Because it’s eating him up inside.

Regulus’s hand stills. “Did he hurt you?”

Yes, James almost says, because it feels true. But there’s an edge in Regulus’s voice that gives him pause. He opens his eyes to look at the boy across from him.

“Would it matter?”

“Yes,” he says without hesitating. “I’d kill him.”

The thing is, James thinks he might be serious.

“Don’t think that’d help, but I appreciate the offer.”

Regulus’s eyes narrow. “James—“

“No,” James says quickly. “No. Not me. But someone...important.” He sees Remus’s face, standing in their darkened room, the pain in his eyes. He hears him begging Snape to leave. He hears him screaming.

“Fuck,” James hisses, rolling onto his back and bringing his hands up to his face. “I don’t know what to do. He—it was bad Reg. It was so fucking bad.”

There’s stillness, everything is quiet here, like the rest of the castle doesn’t exist.

“Do know why he did it?” Regulus asks eventually.

James lets out a humourless laugh. “Merlin, I don’t know. He was upset but—all he’s said to me is that he wasn’t thinking.” Even saying that out loud makes the anger boil his blood again.

“He wasn’t thinking,” Regulus repeats slowly. And then, all of the sudden, he’s sitting up.

“Reg?” James asks, a little startled, propping himself on his elbows.

Regulus’s legs are crossed, his expression distant.

“Hey,” James reaches out, tugging lightly on his shirt. “Sorry, do you not want to talk about—I realize he’s your brother and things are—“

Regulus shakes his head. “No, it’s fine,” and then; “Listen, I don’t know what happened,” he runs a hand nervously through his short curls, “but he might not mean what you think he does when he says he wasn’t thinking.”

James’s brows draw together. “I’m going to need you to explain that.”

He nods, clearly expecting it. “You remember how I said that sometimes I have to lock parts of me up? That I can’t...feel everything?” his eyes are focused on some distant point on the bed.

“Yeah,” James says slowly, “I remember.”

“Sirius was the one who taught me that trick.”

James feels his eyebrows raise. “Trick?”

“We were—I don’t know—Seven and eight? Maybe he was nine, I can’t remember. I was bawling my eyes out because our mother had gone on one of her rampages and he was just...

fine,” Regulus shakes his head, an almost rueful look on his face. “He was always fine, even though he got the brunt of it, put himself in her line of fire every time. He never cried, I was so jealous of that when I was a kid.”

He pauses, James watching him pick at the blanket in front of him, trying not to think about Sirius in Dumbledore’s office today, trying to hold back his tears.

“So he told me,” Regulus goes on eventually, “told me that he just took all the things he didn’t want to feel or think, that he didn’t want our mother to see—“

“To see?” James interrupts.

“Yeah,” his voice goes a little wonky. “Walburga is very good at Legilimency. It’s hard to hide things in that house.”

James can feel the horror on his face. “Jesus Christ.”

Regulus flashes him a grim smile before he goes back to staring at the bed. “Yeah, anyway, you can kind of—hide things, inside yourself—we used to practice. We got good at it. I don’t know if it’s proper Occlumency or not, but, it works,” he takes a deep breath. “Thing is—when you hide things from yourself, feelings, thoughts, it makes the rest of the world feel kind of far away and ... I don’t know, pointless,” he looks up again and holds James’s gaze this time. “You can do things you wouldn’t normally.”

And James has no idea what to do with...any of that. The idea of Sirius and Regulus hiding out in Grimmauld Place teaching themselves how not to feel is heartbreaking, and he wonders, not for the first time, how either of them survived it.

“I’m not saying that to excuse whatever it is that he did,” Regulus goes on. “But when he says he wasn’t thinking, it’s just, it means more coming from him, that’s all,” he smiles weakly. “He’s the best of us, really. Even when he was a kid. Always stood up to her. And they made him pay for it,” he chews on his bottom lip. “They’re still making him pay for it.”

James feels his eyes go wide. “Are you—do you think Sirius is right? About your uncle? That they had him killed for reaching out to him?”

Regulus shrugs. “I don’t know, but, I wouldn’t be surprised. You don’t just get to walk away from the House of Black. That’s not how it works.”

It’s all too much. How do people handle these things? What are you supposed to do? Because James has no fucking idea. He pulls himself up to sit properly, bending his knees on the mattress and hanging his head for a minute.

He doesn’t want to talk about Sirius anymore.

He can’t.

It’s too confusing.

It hurts too much.

“Do you still have to do it?” he asks instead.

“Do what?”

James looks up, Regulus’s eyes on him. Every time, he thinks, every bloody time he finds that stare his insides catch on fire.

“Hide things from yourself?”

Regulus looks at him for a long time. “Yeah,” he says eventually. “I had to hide you.”

“Me?”

Regulus nods and then looks away. James can see him chewing on the inside of his cheek. “It’s part of the reason I was such a wreck when I came back. You—” he laughs sadly. “You take up so much space in me, that when I had to feel it again—it was too much. So much more than it had ever been before. I couldn’t bear it—well, you saw.”

James watches him, eyes running over the ends of his hair, the tip of his nose, the way his lips quirk. He tries to breathe through everything going on inside him. Tries to hold it all.

He reaches out, makes sure Regulus can see, makes sure he goes slow enough that he could pull away.

“C’mon here,” he says roughly, linking their fingers together and giving Regulus a light tug. He comes, the pair of them falling back onto the bed, Regulus in James’s arms, face burrowing in his neck.

“Je t’aime,” Regulus whispers, kissing behind his ear, “je t’aime, je t’aime, je t’aime.” Every word is punctuated with a kiss—quick and sweet. Under his jaw, along his neck, Regulus’s breath warm against his skin. James’s eyes flutter closed.

“English,” the word punches out of him. “Just once. Say it in English once.”

Regulus stills but doesn’t pull away, lips still brushing against James in an accidental way that sends shivers down his spine. Eventually Regulus props himself up on his elbows, looking at James like he’s the only thing in the world, and James can barely stand it. Regulus leans down and brings their mouths together, slow and purposeful, ripping a gasp out of James when he pulls away.

“I love you,” Regulus says, stare determined even as his voice shakes. “I’m sorry.”

James doesn’t understand that, doesn’t know how to make sense of it over the blood rushing in his ears, the heart beating in his chest.

“Don’t apologize,” he lifts himself up to Regulus’s mouth. “Don’t ever apologize for loving me.”

Chapter End Notes

Hello lovelies!

Remus is heartbroken and James has basically divorced Sirius but Regulus said I love you so it all evens out in the end, right?

Honestly, I always find the fallout from The Prank so stressful. Because I, like Euphemia Potter, am a firm believer that James and Sirius belong together (platonically but also they are soulmates)

Thank you for your wonderful comments! Always appreciate it!

Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

Guys, gals, and non-binary pals, I give you: Remus John Lupin.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

When Remus Lupin was five years old a monster broke into his bedroom and bit him. It sounds ridiculous doesn't it? Some story made up to scare little kids. Remus isn't sure he would believe it himself if it hadn't happened to him. But it's there on his side, between his ribs and his hips, the unmistakable imprint of teeth. The skin white and puckered, the ugliest, he thinks, of all of his scars.

I don't think they're ugly, Sirius had said to him once, third year. I think they're beautiful.

The infuriating thing about Sirius Black—well, one of many—is that he can just say things like that. Without thinking. Without caring. Everything about Sirius is careless—his hair, his flying, his words. Sirius acts like nothing matters. It should be annoying—obnoxious—but really, it's addictive. Remus feels like he can never get enough of it. Like he's hungry for him all the time.

He worries that it isn't hormones.

That it's the wolf.

That one day he'll lose control and eat Sirius whole.

When Remus Lupin was five years old a monster broke into his bedroom and bit him. It was his father's fault. His father who hates werewolves. Who wants them dead. Ended up with one for a son. Talk about family dysfunction.

Sometimes Remus wishes it had happened later—that he could have had more time with his parents before all they saw when they looked at him was tragedy. He expects it would be easier to be angry with them. But he isn't. Mostly he just hurts for them. They're good people, they probably would have been good parents. If things had been different.

He knows that they tried for a while, to have another kid. He supposes that's another thing he should be angry about. But he just thinks it's too bad that it didn't work out. They deserved a do-over.

When Remus Lupin was five years old a monster broke into his bedroom and bit him. It was the worst pain he had ever felt in his life—that is, until he transformed for the first time.

Locked in the cellar. No windows. No light. Stone floors and stone walls. His father had revarnished the door with wolfsbane. Every time Remus touches it his skin burns, even when he isn't a wolf. It's a trick his father has used a few more times—on his office, the bedroom. Precautions. In case Remus gets out on some full moon. In case he comes for them in the night.

Most children ask their parents to check for monsters under their beds. Or in their closets. But thanks to Fenrir Greyback, Lyall and Hope Lupin never had to check. The monster had come and gone and Remus never thought it likely any others would visit. Because he wasn't a little boy anymore. Not really. Not after that. He was a wolf. Just as scary as anything else that goes bump in the night.

“Okay,” Lily says as she drops abruptly into the seat across from him, making Remus jump. The books that had been in her hands fan out in front of her. “What is going on?”

He looks at her for a moment before returning his attention to the book in front of him. He's finished all his homework, now he's just revising for his OWLs...again.

“Hello to you too,” he says without lifting his eyes.

“Remus.”

“Lily.”

He can practically hear the frown in her voice. “Sirius is off the quidditch team, Frank is living in your dorm, and the four of you are avoiding one another like the bloody plague.”

“We are not,” Remus says, feeling particularly defensive about that last point. Because, the truth is, he has been avoiding James and Peter, but he hates that he's doing it, and hates it even more that people have noticed. Especially Lily.

“You are. I tried to ignore it but I can't bear it anymore. What happened?”

Remus bites down on his lower lip, staring intently at the words that he's no longer reading. Honestly, Lily's so pushy she could give Sirius a run for his money.

“Remus!” she says exasperated, before she yanks the book right out from under him.

“Oi!” he tries to snatch it back but he's too slow.

An aggressive “sh-ing” noise comes from the table next to them. “I was reading that!” Remus whisper-shouts. “And I swear if you get me band from the library I will never forgive you.”

Lily does not look particularly concerned by either of these statements. She promptly folds down the corner of Remus's page—like an animal—before closing the book on the table and resting her hands on top of it.

“Remus,” she whispers back, “you've been sulking for weeks.”

“I have not been sulking,” he crosses his arms over his chest and then, realizing how little that helps, quickly uncrosses them.

Lily arches a disbelieving eyebrow. “You have. You all have.”

He wishes she would stop bringing James and Peter into this. He feels bad enough about them already, he doesn’t need her reminding him what a shit friend he’s been. Or how it’s all his fault that any of this happened in the first place. Yes, obviously Sirius is the biggest asshole on the planet. But if Remus just hadn’t been...if he had just been someone else. Then none of it would have happened.

James puts on a brave face but Remus can see how much it kills him, not talking to Sirius. Part of him wants to tell James it’s okay, that he can forgive him if he wants, but the truth is, Remus is too selfish. Because if there’s a choice—between Remus and Sirius—Remus knows who James’ll pick. And he just can’t bear the thought of losing James. At least not yet.

“Hey,” Lily reaches forward, tapping the back of his hand lightly. “Where’d you go?”

Remus shakes his head, trying to get his thoughts straight. “Sorry.”

Lily looks genuinely concerned now. “It’s bad, huh?”

Remus almost laughs, running a hand over his face. “Yeah,” he says finally. “Yeah it’s bad.”

Her eyes are bright and green and very intent on looking directly at him. Remus does his best not to squirm but he’s not sure he manages it. He’s never gotten comfortable with being looked at. His parents spent so much of his life looking at the floor, or the ceiling, or some spot over his shoulder, that coming to Hogwarts and having people stare right at him has never felt natural.

“Come on,” Lily says suddenly, scooping up their books in her arms and getting to her feet.

Remus blinks. “Um—what are you doing?”

“We’re going for a walk,” she nods her head over her shoulder, towards the door. “Come on, lets go.”

Remus considers fighting her but something in her eyes tells him it would be a lost cause, so reluctantly he gets to his feet, grabbing his bag off the back of his chair.

“I hope you know that I’m only letting you boss me around because I like you.”

She beams in a way that’s so reminiscent of Sirius it makes his heart hurt.

“And that right there is why we’re friends,” she says as she hands him back his book and they start making their way to the exit.

“Because I like you?”

“Because you liking me leads to you doing what I say.”

Remus snorts. “Oh right. Of course,” and then; “also because you know that I’m the only one who actually takes notes in Binns’s class.”

“Remus,” she gasps with mock indignation. “I would never use you for your History of Magic notes. Besides, it’s a fair trade, since I’m loads better at potions than you are.”

“Too good. Now I have to deal with Slughorn coming after me about his bloody dinner parties and Sirius and James coming after me for actually considering going.”

“Merlin, those two are a nightmare, aren’t they?” she says as she steers them towards the courtyard.

Remus shrugs noncommittally, ignoring the tightening in his chest. He can feel Lily giving him a look out of the corner of her eye.

“You should come you know,” she says eventually.

Remus arches his brow. “To the Slug club? Nah, I don’t think so. Not for me really.”

“Not for you or not for James and Sirius?”

Remus stops abruptly, so abruptly, in fact, that Lily is a few steps ahead before she realizes, turning back to him with a questioning look.

“If this is going to be a James Potter bashing fest, I’m really not interested, okay?”

Lily’s eyes go wide. “No—I—sorry,” she sighs, tucking her hair behind her ear. “Sorry,” she repeats. “Old habits die hard. I just meant—they seem like the type of thing you might like if you let yourself.”

Remus looks at her skeptically, but starts walking again, the pair of them pushing through the doors to the outside, the spring evening warm and sweet, the sky pink as the sun dips below the horizon.

“I went to one, if you remember.”

She nods, clearly trying to hide a smile. “I do. I remember you talking to absolutely no one and then leaving early.”

“Well everyone there was a social climbing prat,” he shoots her a quick look. “No offence.”

She laughs, “None taken,” they pull up to one of the benches and Lily collapses, dropping her book bag with a dramatic sigh. “Well, if you’re not going to make new friends you’re going to have to stop avoiding the ones you already have.”

Remus’s mouth forms a flat line, “I’m not avoiding them,” he repeats for the hundredth time.

Lily sends him a skeptical look. “Yesterday I watched you make a u-turn in the middle of the hallway when you saw Sirius walking towards you.”

Remus had hoped he'd managed to be a bit more subtle about that. "Well, okay," he mutters eventually, picking at some lint on his pants, "him I am avoiding."

"Sirius? Why?"

Why.

There are so many reasons really. Or maybe just one. He's never sure with Sirius. Never sure of where they stand or how he feels or what he wants.

He's memorized all the moments they've touched. He has a list in his head that he pulls up on bad days. Halloween, second year, when Sirius threw his arm around Remus's shoulders. Or his birthday in fourth, when Sirius got tipsy for the first time and kissed his cheek. Or a few weeks ago, the last time, when he laid in bed and Sirius caressed his cheek.

Maybe those are the reasons he's avoiding Sirius. Because if they didn't exist maybe it wouldn't hurt so much that Sirius had told Snape. If he didn't have lists of Sirius Black in his head maybe he could just brush it off. So what if he only saw Remus as a pet? He'd been worse things.

"Hello?" Lily waves her hand in front of his face, snapping him back to the present. "You still with me?"

"Yeah, sorry, my mind kind of..." he doesn't know how to finish that sentence.

"Was it—did he do something to you specifically?" Lily asks, when Remus can't seem to summon anymore words. "I guess that makes sense, it would have to be something like that to get Potter to stop talking to him."

Remus sighs, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Potter, Lily? Really? Are we back to that?"

Now it's her turn to get defensive. "You said you didn't want this to be a James Potter bashing fest."

"I don't."

"Then I suggest we change the subject."

Remus rolls his eyes. "You can't avoid him forever."

"First of all, yes, I absolutely can. And second, pot? Kettle?"

"I am not avoiding James."

"Oh my God Remus, we're talking in circles. You are. You know it and I know it. So lets get over the denial bit shall we?"

Remus scowls. "Well, I have a valid reason."

"Brilliant, so do I."

“Not hardly.”

“Um, excuse me?” Lily waves her hand in the direction of the lawn.

Remus rolls his eyes. “That wasn’t an exile worthy offence.”

“I don’t think the silent treatment can reasonably be considered exile.”

But Remus doesn’t take it back, crossing his arms over his chest and sending her a pointed look.

Lily holds his gaze for a second or two before throwing her arms up in exasperation. “I don’t know what you want me to say. I thought he’d grown out of being a berk, clearly he hasn’t, and honestly? I don’t have the energy to deal with it.”

“You don’t think you could cut him a little slack here?” Remus asks. “They were extenuating circumstances.”

“They were extenuating circumstances for everyone, you didn’t see the rest of us trying to undress someone in front of the whole school.”

“Or shouting out slurs,” Remus counters, causing a dark look to pass over her face.

“Yeah, well, I’m not speaking to him either.”

Silence falls around them, and when Remus can’t hold Lily’s stare any longer he turns to the sky, eyeing it wearily. A month really isn’t a very long time and the full moon is coming up again. The first full moon where Snape will know. Where Sirius won’t be there.

“I’m just saying,” Remus breaks eventually. “It would be a shame if you two went back to how you were,” he looks over at Lily. “You were good together.”

She makes a noise somewhere between a cough and a gag and Remus rolls his eyes. “That’s not what I meant. You’re both just so...bright, y’know? Watching you go head to head when you’re having fun is brilliant.”

“Fun?” Lily repeats, brow raised.

“Oh fine, pretend like you don’t know what I mean, but I know you do.”

She shakes her head, slipping down in her seat and resting her head on the back of the bench. “I like him more than I thought I would,” she confesses eventually, and Remus thinks he feels himself genuinely smile for the first time in a while.

“Oh yeah?”

She turns her head, a sharp look in her eyes. “But don’t you dare tell him I said that. I’m still mad at him. Besides, his head doesn’t need to get any bigger.”

“It’s really not that big, it’s just his hair.”

Lily lets out a surprised huff of laughter. “That was a terrible joke.”

Remus shrugs. “Sorry, best I got. But I won’t tell him,” he leans in a little closer, mock-whispering. “I’m avoiding him remember?”

“Ah,” she nods. “But not for the same reason you’re avoiding Sirius?”

“No—or, yes—I don’t know,” he sits back, running a frustrated hand through his hair. “It’s complicated.”

He can feel Lily eyeing him and can’t decide if she’s waiting for more information or if she just can’t find anything better to look at. Part of him wants to tell her, to let it all out. It’s exhausting. The lies. Where does he go every month? What are all his scars from? Why is he always getting sick? His schoolmates don’t really ask anymore. Not because they’re satisfied with the stories he tells, but because they’re tired of hearing them. Of never getting a straight answer out of him.

He looks over when he hears Lily start rummaging through her bag. “I swear I threw them in here,” she mutters to herself, “come on you—ah ha!” she pulls herself back up, a small silver box in her hand. She slides the lid open to reveal a neat row of cigarettes.

Remus arches his brow as she places one between her lips before offering him the box.

“Lily Evans, I never,” he laughs as he takes one for himself. “Is this really respectable behaviour for a Gryffindor prefect?”

“You tell me,” she says, words slightly muffled as she gestures him forward until the ends of their cigarettes are almost touching. He expects her to pull out a lighter but instead she brings her fingers up and snaps. She makes a pleased trilling noise when they both light, pulling back to inhale.

“Never done two at the same time before,” she says proudly.

Remus is still feeling rather stunned by the whole thing. “You ever shown James that trick?” he asks eventually, the smoke is dry and scratchy in his lungs. It’s not that he’s never smoked before, only that he hasn’t done much of it. The last time he tried he practically coughed up the entire contents of his chest.

“I have not.”

Remus nods. “Probably a good idea to keep it that way, I think he’d combust.”

“Cool isn’t it?” Lily snorts. “Mary taught me last summer.”

“Ah, Mary, of course. I should have guessed,” the cigarette doesn’t feel natural between his fingers, not the way it looks between Lily’s. He feels like a kid playing at being a grown-up.

A few moments pass, Lily blowing elegant grey clouds into the sky, Remus trying to stop himself from choking.

“My dad used to smoke,” Lily says eventually. “The smell, I don’t know, makes me feel better—calm. Thought it might help.”

Remus doesn’t know much about Lily’s dad, apart from the fact that he died when she was in second year. He remembers that morning, the pale look on her face, the way she had walked away from the table and not come back to class all day.

“Were you close?” he finds himself asking.

She smiles a little, looking up at the sky. “Sure, I mean, I wasn’t telling him my deepest darkest secrets or anything, but…” she closes her eyes for a minute, inhaling deeply. “He used to make me laugh,” the smoke slips between her lips. “He’d do anything for a good joke. And he used to build things—turned our garage into a workshop, made wooden swords and little thrones for me and my sister. I loved that place,” she sighs. “Now it just has a car in it.”

Remus watches her for a minute, the evening growing dimmer. “I’m sorry,” he says eventually.

She looks over at him. “I’m sorry about Sirius.”

“Not sure it’s quite the same as your dad dying,” he offers her a weak smile but she doesn’t return it.

“Doesn’t mean it isn’t still painful. You reckon you’ll be able to get passed it?”

Remus grimaces, looking down at the cigarette in his hand and flicking the ash off just for something to do. “I don’t know. Not sure I know how.” He inhales too quickly, suddenly spluttering and coughing, leaning forward as his eyes water.

“Woah, breathe cowboy,” Lily pats him on the back, laughing.

“Sorry,” Remus’s voice comes out scratchy, “not much of a smoker.”

“I can see that,” she smiles. “I’m surprised, I would have thought James and Sirius would be all over it, fits so nicely with their bad-boy images.”

Remus half-chokes and half-laughs. “I don’t know, do wizards even smoke cigarettes? I’ve seen some old ones with pipes, but I’ve never walked into a shop in Diagon and seen a pack of cigarettes for sale.”

Lily arches her brow. “I mean, you would know better than me.”

“What?” he asks, momentarily confused as he wipes the last of the tears from his eyes. “Why?”

She sends him a bemused look before pointing at herself. “Muggle-born.”

He blinks a few times. “Oh—oh, well. I’m not much better,” when her brows draw together he explains. “Grew up in the country, not really around anyone else, my dad—he’s the wizard

of the family—he's always been pretty...busy...with work," with avoiding his werewolf son, but Remus figures that level of candour is unnecessary. "So it was my mum who was around mostly, and her mum, my granny, a few cousins would come visit from time to time, all muggle," he shrugs. "Barely saw magic before I came to Hogwarts."

"Huh," Lily says thoughtfully, rolling the cigarette between her fingers. "I always figured if you were magic you would use it all the time."

"I think some people probably do."

"I will," she shoots him a grin. "God, the minute I'm allowed I'll use magic for everything."

Remus laughs. "Everything?"

She nods. "Everything. Cooking? Ha! Magic. Need something from the next room? Please, I'll accio all day, never move. I'll never flick another light switch, never pick up another dustpan. I'll apparate everywhere I go, who needs to walk?"

"Well, it's good to know you'll be putting your powers to good use," Remus says dryly.

She only grins wider. "It'll be brilliant. I can't wait to have a house full of magic—plants and potions and moving portraits."

Remus nods, though he does his best not to think about the future. He's not sure what it holds for him, but he can't imagine it's anything good. Not a lot of opportunities out there for werewolves, and it won't take long for any wizard with half-a-brain to sniff him out.

"Hey," he looks over as Lily pulls lightly on his shirt. "It's going to be okay you know?" she says, even though she can't possibly have any idea what he's thinking. He wonders what it is that she sees on his face.

"Yeah," he manages after a moment, dropping the cigarette from his hand and crushing it under his heel. "Sure, Lily."

He doesn't know when he fell in love with Sirius Black. It might have been the first time he saw him—stampeding into their dorm room with James behind him, so big and loud and full of life in a way that Remus craved. It might have been the first time Sirius smiled at him—not just around him, but at him. Because of him. Or one of the late nights when Pete and James had fallen asleep and Sirius and Remus had stayed up, sitting in the window, talking, legs tangled in each other.

He misses being able to touch like that. Casually. Naturally. He knows that he always liked it, that he always kept lists of those moments. But he hadn't really thought much about why. About what it meant. Not until last year, when he started having to watch Sirius touch other people. When he would stay up late by himself because Sirius wasn't back yet. Sometimes he would check the map, he wasn't proud of it, it felt like an invasion of Sirius's privacy, and it certainly wasn't good for Remus. But he couldn't help it. He would check and inevitably find

Sirius in some broom cupboard, or in the astronomy tower, his name too close to someone else's.

He did cry about it. Once. Maybe twice. Pathetic.

You can always feel Sirius, he takes up space in every room he enters, drawing you to him without even saying a word. He's magnetic. And Remus has always been powerless against it. So really it's impressive, when he stops at the end of the hall, feet away from the portrait to the Gryffindor common room. Impressive that he doesn't go rushing right to the lithe figure leaning against the wall. It's been weeks since he's been properly near Sirius and he can feel the pull in his chest, the hunger in his stomach. Sirius's eyes meet his.

"Moons—"

"I don't think we're on nickname terms right now," Remus cuts him off.

Sirius nods, turning to face Remus properly but not attempting to close the gap between them. For a moment they just stand there, staring at one another. "I've been waiting for you," Sirius says finally, looking hopelessly awkward.

"Okay."

"I—listen, can we talk?"

"We are talking."

Sirius makes a frustrated noise at the back of his throat that Remus thinks is entirely unwarranted. "I've given you time, okay—"

"How generous of you," Remus says coldly, feeling his anger slowly overshadowing everything else going on inside of him. Which is good. Anger is the easiest thing to feel.

"I just mean—" Sirius swipes a hand over his face. "I just mean—I want you to talk to me. Please. Just let me—give me this chance."

No, Remus's brain answers automatically. No we can't talk. No you don't get chances. Not after everything you've done, you selfish, manipulative, lying piece of—

"Talk then," says Remus's traitorous mouth.

Sirius looks surprised. "What?"

"You want to talk? Go for it, I'm waiting."

"I—er—well, maybe we should go, I don't know, somewhere a little more..." he looks around, a pair of first years walking up behind him towards the portrait, another group of students laughing further down the hall, "private?"

"Where?" Remus demands.

Sirius's hand rubs the back of his neck nervously. "Frank's—I mean—my room, we could—"

Remus laughs. "I am not going back to your room with you."

Sirius wrinkles his nose. "You don't have to make it sounds so—"

"So?"

"—sinister."

"Everything with you sounds sinister now."

Sirius stiffens for a minute, staring back at him with those ridiculous eyes, and that ridiculous mouth. Remus has never hated someone so much. Never missed someone. Never wanted to sink his teeth in so deep.

"Fine," Sirius says eventually, walking towards Remus but not stopping at him, "come on."

"Where are you going?" and it's habit that has Remus following after him even before he gets an answer, like a fucking dog. He grits his teeth but doesn't turn back.

"You don't want to come back to my room, fine," Sirius mutters as they turn the next corner, walking unnecessarily fast. He stops at an unassuming door, swinging it open and gesturing for Remus to enter.

It takes him a minute to realize what he's looking at. "Oh you would know where all the broom cupboards are," Remus snarks as he walks inside.

"Not all," Sirius corrects unhelpfully, "just the ones close to the common room."

Remus isn't sure if Sirius means for that to sting but it does, his heart giving an inconvenient tug as Sirius closes the door behind them and mutters a silencing charm. And then—

And then.

And then.

Nothing.

They just stand there, Sirius suddenly looking much less confident.

"Well?" Remus demands eventually. "Say something or stop wasting my fucking time."

Sirius flinches. "Right...right," he exhales, looking up through his eyelashes. "Remus."

And Remus hates it. Hates the way he says his name. Like it's hurts. Like it matters. Hates that it makes him want to cry.

"That all you got?" he croaks, when the truth is, from Sirius it's almost enough. So much of Remus just wants to forgive him. Just wants to have him back.

“No,” Sirius laughs without humour. “No I—listen, I didn’t want to hurt you—I’ve never wanted to hurt you,” Sirius is speaking quickly, hands held out pleadingly in front of him, like forgiveness is something Remus can just give to him. Here you go. Make sure to keep that somewhere safe now.

“I know that I did,” Sirius goes on. “I know, and I hate that, you have no idea, but I—” he swallows with difficulty, “I meant what I said at Christmas. You’re important to me.”

Remus snorts, even though he feels like each one of his bones is cracking apart. “Just not as much as you cared about getting back at Snape though, right? Or Rosier? Or was it Regulus you were trying to hurt? It’s not really clear to me,” he can see Sirius shrinking back from his words, taking each one like a blow to the face. “What is clear,” he pushes on, “is that you didn’t think about me at all, not for a single second. That whoever else was involved in this, I never entered the equation, not for you.”

“Remus I—“ Sirius tries desperately, but these words have been building in Remus for weeks and he wants them out. He is tired of having them rot inside him.

“Did you forget that there was a person inside that wolf?” he asks. “Or is that all you see, when you look at me? Some fucking—fucking circus act or something. An animal taught to walk on its hind legs?”

“You can’t think that,” Sirius’s eyes go wide. “You can’t Remus.”

“What else am I supposed to think?” fighting the sob he can already feel building in his chest. “You’re worse than Snape you know that? At least I know where I stand with him. At least I know what he thinks of me. You—you had the fucking audacity to make me believe—to make me believe that maybe—“ but he cuts himself off, unwilling to let that last pathetic truth go.

He can’t stand it anymore, looking at Sirius, feeling him, smelling him. He turns around, pressing his palms flat against the cold wall behind him and trying to breathe.

The silence comes back, wraps itself around them, carving holes in their armour. There never used to be silences between them. Not before this year. Not before the kiss. He used to be able to talk to Sirius for hours. Remus quickly closes his eyes against the burn.

He hears Sirius exhale. “I know that I fucked up. I have no idea how to make it right—I—“ his voice breaks, falls away, cracks as it hits the ground. Sirius growls in frustration and starts again. “You don’t have to forgive me, I don’t deserve it. I understand that, really, I do. I just want you to know—I just need you to understand—that you are so beautiful. Every inch of you, every part of you. You’re the most beautiful thing I have ever seen, and I’m so—so fucking sorry,” his voice is thick, it carries his words like they hurt to hold, “if I made you feel, for even a second, like you aren’t.”

Remus cries then. And he hates it. Hates that he isn’t stronger than this. Hates Sirius for existing. For being all that he is. For burrowing so deeply into Remus’s bones. For breaking his heart. With those girls. With that kiss. With Snape. He feels sore and raw and bleeding.

He presses his forehead against the wall, unwilling to turn around, everything coming out of him in choked gasps, like there isn't enough air.

"Fuck Remus, please—" he hears Sirius step forward, and he wants to tell him to stay the fuck away, because hasn't he done enough? Did he think Remus needed this? Needed someone else to take him apart? But he can't speak, he tries, but all that comes out is some pitiful gasping noise, his shoulder shaking as he tries desperately to shove the sobs back down. Sirius comes up behind him, arms wrapping around him, pulling Remus into his chest.

I hate you, Remus thinks.

I hate you.

I hate you.

"I'm sorry," Sirius's voice is by his ear. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry."

And then, somehow, Sirius's breath isn't the only thing brushing against Remus's skin.

"I'm sorry," he kisses his cheek—messy and desperate. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," his neck, his jaw. "Please, please, I'm sorry." It's sad. It all feels so fucking sad and warped. "I'm sorry," Sirius kisses the tears off of his face. "I'm sorry."

It's the first time he's kissed him since James was hurt. And it curdles his stomach.

"Enough," Remus pushes him off, hands shaking as he turns around to face him, back pressing against the wall. Sirius is a wreck—all pale faced and red-eyed.

"You don't get to do that," Remus says, as steadily as he can manage. "Not now—not like this—not just because you want me to forgive you."

Sirius shakes his head. "No that isn't—I don't know why I did that," and the fear in his voice makes Remus believe him. Which feels worse, if he's being honest. "I don't know why I did that," he repeats to himself.

Remus almost laughs, running a hand over his face, finding himself wishing for the days when the hardest thing about this was Sirius's denial.

"Brilliant," he bites out, maybe more harshly than he should. He isn't sure anymore. Doesn't know what either of them deserves. "Great talk, you can go now."

"Remus—"

"Do you have anything else to say?" he's barely getting the words out, desperately trying to drag his anger back to the surface to block out the rest of it. "Because if not, you can go."

He sees the flare of irritation in Sirius's eyes. "And what? You're just going to hide out in the broom cupboard?"

"Why," Remus growls, "do you need it for something?"

He sees that hit land, it's not as satisfying as it ought to be.

"I'm not—there isn't—" Sirius grimaces, clearly frustrated, though whether it's with himself or Remus, Remus doesn't know. "There isn't...anyone...right now," his words are broken pieces.

"I don't care," Remus lies.

He knows that Sirius can tell, he's grateful when he doesn't push it. "You don't need to stay here—I'll wait if it's—if you just don't want to be stuck walking back together or whatever."

What I want, he almost says, is for you to not argue with me for once in our lives.

"I want to not look like I've been crying when I walk through the common room," he says instead. "You're the asshole, you get to walk out there looking like a mess."

Sirius gives him a quick once over, and really, Remus must look terrible, because Sirius doesn't bother arguing after that.

"Right," he says, nodding, eyes on the ground, contrition doesn't suit him. "Yeah, okay."

And Remus should just let him go. It's what he wants. To be left alone. And yet, for some inexplicable reason, when he sees Sirius's hand on the door, he hears himself say: "I told James."

Sirius freezes, a brief pause before he turns back to look at Remus. "Told him?" he asks cautiously.

Remus nods. "About—that you kissed me."

He isn't sure what kind of reaction he's expecting from Sirius, but in the end he doesn't get much. A stiff nod, Sirius's teeth slipping over his bottom lip. "He took that well I expect?"

Remus doesn't know if that's sarcasm or not. "He already knew I think—or, he had some idea that something was going on. He didn't seem surprised. Just...listened. You know how he is," Remus clamps his mouth shut, trying to put an end to the word vomit now pouring out of him.

"I know how he is," Sirius repeats quietly, before letting out a dry laugh. "Be hypocritical for him to have an issue with it."

Remus feels his brow furrow. "What do you mean?"

"You know how he's been sneaking out at night?" Sirius asks.

"Yeah?"

Sirius doesn't say anything, just arches his brow and waits for Remus to catch-up. Under different circumstances it probably wouldn't have taken him so long.

“Oh,” he says, when it finally hits him. “Really?”

Sirius gives him a weak smile. “Yeah, took me a bit by surprise too, after—”

“Lily,” Remus finishes for him, a dozen assumptions and moments reconfiguring themselves in his head.

“Yeah,” Sirius’s voice is rough. “Look, don’t—uh—don’t go saying anything alright? The bloke, whoever it is, doesn’t want anyone to know, I reckon James wasn’t really meant to say anything to me so...”

“Not great at keeping people’s secrets are you?” it’s a cheap shot, that slips out of Remus before he can think better of it.

He watches Sirius absorb the hit, watches him fight his natural urge to push back. “Yeah,” he says eventually, voice gravel. “Well,” he turns back to the door but pauses again, clearing his throat without turning around. “If you—uh—if you figure out what you need me to do, to make this right, to fix this, let me know okay?” he breathes in. “I’ll do anything for you Remus.”

Those words hit Remus like a blow to the head, Sirius pushing out into the corridor before he has the chance to recover.

He can’t sleep. He hasn’t been able to since the full moon. Five years he’s slept with Sirius next to him, and now that he’s gone the room isn’t right. Frank doesn’t breathe right or snore right or move right. Everything he does sets off alarm bells in Remus’s head screaming “wrong, wrong, wrong.” Remus lies on his bed, staring up at the canopy over his head, mind thrumming with thoughts and memories.

When they were eleven, Sirius found the books Remus’s mum had bought him.

“What are these?” he’d snatched one off of Remus’s bedside table before collapsing next to him on the mattress.

“That’s a book. You read it. A foreign concept to you, I know.”

Sirius swatted at him, “Prick.” But Remus had only laughed, watching Sirius roll onto his back and hold the book over his face.

“No really,” he’d said after a few minutes. “What is this?”

“It’s a book!”

Sirius screwed up his face, wrinkling his nose and sticking out his tongue and Remus couldn’t stop himself from laughing again.

“It doesn’t look right.”

“Well,” Remus had tried to get himself under control. “It’s muggle, maybe that’s why?”

“No way!” Sirius promptly flipped onto his stomach, legs dangling off the side of the bed. “Wicked, what’s it about?”

“Uh,” Remus watched Sirius flipping enthusiastically through the pages with a fondness he wouldn’t understand for several years to come, “lots of things really, friendship, adventure, magic—“

Sirius’s head shot up at that. “Magic? Muggles have books about magic? What the heck, does the Minister know about this?”

Remus rolled his eyes. “Well, it’s not our magic.”

“Our magic?”

“They don’t know that magic is real, so they make up what they think magic would be like if it was.”

Sirius continued to stare at him for a moment and Remus was sure he’d lost him, but then he smiled.

“Wicked,” he repeated, turning back to the book.

Remus had watched him for a minute, mouth feeling oddly dry. “You can—uh—borrow it, if you want?”

Sirius’s eyes flicked back to him. “Yeah?”

“Yeah,” Remus nodded, probably too enthusiastically. “Of course.”

“Thanks,” he’d smiled again and Remus had smiled back, feeling an odd bit of pride at having been able to give Sirius something. He’d always felt like he was lagging behind in those first few years. And for once he’d known something Sirius hadn’t. Had something Sirius wanted. He’d often wondered since then what it would do to Sirius’s bad-boy reputation if people knew he was a nerd for muggle fantasy books. Remus never said anything to anyone though, not even James or Peter. The books were their thing—his and Sirius’s. He had liked that.

Groaning, Remus curls onto side, willing his brain to shut-up and leave him alone and let him sleep. Shockingly, this does not prove to be a particularly effective strategy. He flips back onto his back, running his hands over his face a few times before peeking his head out of his bed-curtains. He can hear Frank’s out of place breathing and Peter’s snoring and James’s, predictable, absence. Carefully, he slides out of bed, padding towards James’s bedside table and opening the drawer.

It’s been a long time since he looked for Sirius on the map. He doesn’t want to start again. Doesn’t want to need to. But he still pulls out the faded parchment, sitting down on James’s empty bed, wand in hand. He spends a good five minutes like that, just staring at it, trying

desperately to convince himself to just put it away and go back to sleep. This isn't going to help. But. Of course. He doesn't.

The map unfolds in his lap. He's not sure what he's expecting, but there's Sirius, alone in Frank's old room, apparently not able to sleep either because according to the map he's pacing. Remus watches him, feeling something deep inside him ache.

"You know," he whispers to the little name, "for a minute there, I really thought you saw me." It's all very anti-climatic, and predictably does nothing to make him feel better.

He sighs, about to put the map away when the sudden appearance of two other names catches his attention.

James Potter.

Regulus Black.

Standing together somewhere on the seventh floor in the middle of the night. Remus blinks several times before rubbing his eyes, but even when they refocus the names remain the same. And incredibly close together. Then Regulus starts walking towards the Slytherin common room, James waiting until he disappears around the corner before heading for Gryffindor Tower.

There is probably a very valid reason for them being together, Remus tries to reassure himself. Like they just ran into one another, by coincidence, at three in the morning. Stranger things have happened.

Except Sirius said...

Interjects the troublesome voice in his head. But no. No. Remus shuts that right down because there's no way—

...said that James is seeing a...

Yes, sure, but that doesn't mean that just because Regulus is a bloke—a bloke James is meeting in the dead of night. At the same time that he confessed to Sirius he was spending with his—his what? Hook-up? Boyfriend? Jesus, is Regulus Black his boyfriend?

NO.

That's ridiculous. James isn't that stupid. He can't be. James, the boy who can't stand anyone who even entertains the idea of dark magic. Who has been running around since he was eleven trying to rid the world of evil doers. That James Potter would never get involved with Regulus. It isn't possible.

Remus hears someone on the stairs and quickly taps the map blank, shoving it back in the drawer with a little more force than he ought to considering there were two sleeping people in the room. He's only just closed the curtains around his bed when the door quietly opens, James slipping in as he does most nights. For some reason Remus's pulse is jackhammering in his chest.

He spent months trying to get Sirius to leave it alone. To let James come to them when he was ready, talking him down time and again from following James through the castle and now—now he thinks maybe that was a mistake. Because if he really is seeing Regulus...then someone should have stopped this.

He hears James get into his bed and resists the urge to go over there right now and demand answers. Demand how he could be so fucking stupid. But he can't, not with Frank—hell, not even with Peter. Forget the fact that Regulus is, at best, an unpleasant person. If Sirius ever finds out he'll kill him. And not metaphorically.

Remus barely represses a groan as he shoves his face into his pillow. As if his own love life wasn't messy enough.

He watches James the next morning, looking for some sort of...sign. A convenient "Regulus was here" scribbled across the back of his neck or something. Honestly it's so ludicrous he keeps wondering if he didn't just make it up. Misread the names. Hallucinate for a few minutes.

"Alright, Moony?" James asks, standing by the door, double checking his books. Are you snogging Regulus Black? he nearly blurts out, but, luckily, despite his lack of sleep, he still has some self-control.

"You do look a bit peaky Moons," Peter looks at him, head slightly tilted, concern written across his face.

"Why Moons?" Frank asks as he comes out of the washroom, filling the room with the smell of a distinctly new aftershave. It isn't that it's bad, nothing about Frank is bad. Just wrong.

"Huh?" James asks, tearing his eyes away from Remus.

"The nickname, you call him Moon or whatever," Frank hoists his book bag over his shoulder. "Where did it come from?"

"We've never called him Moon," Peter says, in such a matter of fact tone that Remus almost laughs.

"I just heard—"

"Pete is right, we've never called him Moon, no idea what you're on about Frank."

"You know what I mean," the older boy says, sounding slightly exasperated. He really doesn't have the stamina to handle them.

James nudges Pete with his elbow. "You know what he means?"

Peter shakes his head. "Not a clue."

“You literally just—it’s not like it’s a secret, you walk around calling each other nonsense in front of everyone,” Frank’s eyes go back and forth between their blank faces before shaking his head. “You know what? Forget it. It’s too early for this.”

James laughs as they all start moving towards the door. He shoots Remus a look, concern flickering back across his face. “Moons?”

“Sorry, yeah, coming.”

“I BLOODY HEARD THAT!” comes Frank's voice from down the stairs.

He could just let it go—should just let it go. Not like he doesn’t have enough to worry about as it is. Besides, James is allowed to go off and snog whoever he wants. Even Regulus Black. Remus cringes without meaning to.

Anyway, what does Remus know about anything? He isn’t exactly a relationship expert. What makes him think he has a right to decide what is and isn’t good? Other than the fact that he’s caught Regulus and his asshole friends several times picking on younger muggle-born students. Regulus is never actively involved, which is smart of him really, means he never gets detention, but he is always there. Laughing and jeering with the rest of them. Remus’s eyes trail to James who’s walking just slightly ahead of him, discussing quidditch strategies with Frank. He wonders if James knows that. He wonders if he just doesn’t care.

He shakes his head, trying to get that thought out, angry with himself for even thinking it in the first place. James isn’t like that. But then, he hadn’t thought Sirius was like that either, and look how that turned out.

And then, as if his thoughts are manifesting themselves, he spots a dark head down the hall.

“Hey Pete,” it’s a stupid split-second decision. “I just remembered I forgot to return something to the library, I’ll be back in a sec alright?” he starts pulling away.

“You don’t want to wait until after breakfast?” Peter asks, sounding slightly scandalized.

“It won’t take long. I’ll see you in the Great Hall, yeah?”

Remus starts walking more purposefully, checking over his shoulder to make sure James isn’t watching, but him and Frank have already disappeared around the corner.

“Oi, Black!”

Regulus looks up from the conversation he’d been having with two other Slytherin’s, fourth years by the looks of them, neither of them Rosier or Crouch though, which will make things easier.

Regulus doesn’t say anything, just gives him a cold once over before arching a dark eyebrow.

“A word?” Remus says, trying to interject as much Prefect authority into his voice as possible.

There’s a pause during which Remus thinks Regulus might refuse, and he isn’t at all sure what his course of action will be then. Slink back to the Great Hall with his tail between his legs? But then Regulus turns back to his companions, saying something too quiet for Remus to hear before he pulls away from the wall and walks towards him.

“Am I in trouble?” he asks dryly, hands in his pockets, face impassive. Remus searches his eyes for any hint of what it is that James sees in him but he finds nothing. Regulus has none of Sirius’s warmth, or ease, everything about him is tight and controlled and...superficial.

“James trusts too easily,” Remus isn’t interested in pleasantries, though he does make sure to lower his voice. He watches Regulus’s eyes widen and feels his stomach drop. He really had been hoping he was wrong about this. “He sees the good in everyone, even when there isn’t any.”

“Know that from personal experience Lupin?” the younger boy snaps back, quickly recovering from his shock.

Remus hates the way those words tie him up in knots. “Yes,” he answers without wavering. Remus rarely uses his height to intimidate, but he does so now, hovering over the other boy, making himself big. “I want you to know, that if you hurt him, I will take you apart bone by bone. Do you understand?”

Regulus’s grey eyes are unwavering, running over Remus’s face. “Did he tell you?”

“No.”

Regulus nods slowly. “Doesn’t know you’re here then, threatening me?”

“Not a threat,” Remus says with confidence. “It’s a promise. I know you think you’re very tough and scary, that you’ve become immune to the dark after living in that haunted mansion you call a home. But I promise you I am worse than anything you have every faced. And there is nothing I won’t do for him.”

Another moment of silence passes. It’s unnerving, the similarities between Regulus and Sirius. Their faces, their eyes, their hair—all so familiar. And yet, while on Sirius they’re untameable, on Regulus everything has been meticulously manicured and controlled. Forced into a shape it doesn’t want to take.

“You can’t scare me Lupin,” the younger boy says finally, “but you also don’t need to.”

“Oh?”

“I don’t want to hurt him.”

Remus snorts. “You’ll have to excuse me if that doesn’t mean much coming from you.”

Regulus only shrugs. “Believe what you want. Can I go now, or are you going to take house points or something?”

Remus grinds his teeth, contemplating painting several more violent pictures just to really drive his point home. But one look in Regulus’s bored grey eyes tells him there would be no point.

“Go on then,” Remus says eventually, waiting another beat before he heads for the Great Hall. Of all the bloody people James could have chosen, and really, he could have had any of them—apart from Lily. He had to choose Regulus. But then again, Remus had to have Sirius didn’t he? What was it people were always saying about glass houses?

“Idiots,” he mutters under his breath, “the both of us.”

Chapter End Notes

Hello beautiful people!

Oh hey, it's wolfstar ft. Lily Evans.

I just really needed some more Sirius/Remus interaction, so hopefully you guys felt the same!

Your comments are pancakes and hot chocolate with really big marshmallows (fun fact: I have never once spelt marshmallows right on the first try) !

Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

It's nice out. Late spring, the sun has set, the breeze cool but not cold. James closes his eyes for a minute and breathes in, letting the night fill his lungs, stars just starting to wink themselves into view.

"What about that one," he's on his back in the Quidditch stands, pointing up at the sky.

"Which one?" Regulus asks beside him.

"The group there, to the left of the moon."

"Oh to the left of the moon, well that clears it right up," Regulus says dryly and James elbows him.

"Those ones there you prat, the group that looks like a turtle."

Regulus lets out a juvenile snort that makes something warm pool in James's stomach. He turns his head to look at the other boy who's also lying on his back.

"I don't know what's so funny, it does look like a turtle," James says, shuffling just close enough that his words ghost over Regulus's neck. He grins as he sees the other boy shiver, eyes fluttering closed.

"I promise you it doesn't," Regulus says, a little breathlessly, and James likes that so much that he leans forward and plants a kiss just behind his ear, staying there for a few seconds before pulling back to look at the sky again.

"Oh, it totally does, look, right there," he uses his finger to connect the dots, "that's the shell and there's the neck and the head."

Regulus squints up at the sky. "You—oh Jesus Christ, Ophiuchus? You think Ophiuchus is a turtle? You really are an uncultured heathen aren't you?"

"Pfft, sorry I wasn't named after a bloody constellation."

"Regulus isn't a constellation, it's a star, thank you very much."

"If anything that's more embarrassing."

Regulus glares at him. "You know, I don't know where you get off mocking my name when you're the one named after the gay king. Bit on the nose don't you think? Overkill, even."

James blinks, looking over at him. "Wait. Really?"

Regulus rolls his eyes. “You don’t know astronomy or history? Tell me, why do people think you’re so smart again?”

“Was there really a gay king? Of England?”

Regulus lets out an exasperated sigh but James can tell that he’s enjoying this. “James I of England and the VI of Scotland—had a string of young, very pretty, male lovers.”

“No shit.”

Regulus snorts. “Eloquent as always James.”

“Please, call me your majesty.”

“I definitely am not going to do that.”

James grins wickedly, “Aw come on Reg,” he tickles his side.

“Don’t—James—“ he’s already giggling.

“Come here pretty male lover,” he pulls a squirming Regulus on top of him, Regulus pitching forward, hands landing on either side of James’s face. Their eyes meet and hold, the world no bigger than this—this moment between them, this breath, this look.

James reaches his hand up, fingers running through Regulus’s hair, swooping down to cup his face.

“Will you bow to me Regulus?” he asks cheekily.

“Mm,” Regulus turns and kisses the inside of his palm. “I could, but I’d rather get on my knees for you.”

James almost chokes on his next inhale, Regulus smiling as he drops his head and brings their mouths together. So much in James’s life is a mess right now, but this, this has felt so right recently. This has been all good days. And James is grateful, because he’s not sure how he’d be managing without it.

Regulus trails kisses across his jaw, his throat, James’s hands sliding up his shirt.

“Fuck, your hands are cold,” Regulus murmurs against his skin.

“Need you to warm them up.”

Regulus snorts. “You’re terrible at this.”

“Please,” James says, as Regulus pulls back, hovering above him, knees on either side of James’s hips. “I’m endearing.”

“You’re something alright.”

James makes an impatient noise at the back of his throat, sitting up so that Regulus is essentially in his lap. “So much teasing, not enough kissing.”

Regulus laughs into his mouth as James’s hand goes to the back of his head and brings them together again. James is still surprised by how warm Regulus is, how soft. He goes pliant in James’s arms, leaning into the kisses, making small, happy noises when James bites his lower lip.

“We’re going to have to stop,” Regulus is breathless, forehead pressed against James’s, “or I won’t be able to concentrate tomorrow.” James’s gut twists at the mention of tomorrow but he tries to push those feelings aside.

“Ah, you’ve discovered my brilliant strategy,” James says, his fingers playing with the hair at the nape of Regulus’s neck.

“Brilliant strategy?” he asks skeptically.

“Distract the other team’s seeker with memories of my sexual prowess.”

Regulus leans his head back and laughs, the noise echoing in the empty stadium.

“Oh sure, you laugh now,” James goes on, holding back his own smile, “but have you ever tried flying a broom with a hard-on? Bloody difficult.”

Regulus buries his face in James’s shoulder, still shaking. “James please—stop—I can’t breathe.”

Which, really, Regulus ought to know is the surest way to get James to keep talking. “Can you imagine the commentary?” he clears his throat, putting on a voice. “This is shaping up to be an especially hard game today folks, specifically for the Slytherin Seeker. Wonder who he’ll be Slythering into later?”

“You’re a child,” Regulus’s words are muffled as he buries his face further into James’s shoulder.

James laughs, about to continue when another thought occurs to him. “Oh my God, can you imagine McGonagall’s face?! I bet she’d shut the whole bloody game down. Give you detention for violating the sanctity of Quidditch or something.”

Regulus shudders, sitting up so that James can see him again. “Could there be a better boner killer than McGonagall’s face?”

“Oi!” James pinches him, causing the other boy to let out an incredibly adorable squeak. “I’ll not have you slandering Minnie in front of me.”

“Oh my God,” Regulus pinches him back, “have you had fantasies about Professor McGonagall?”

James only snorts. “Personally? No. Mommy issues are not my thing.”

There's a brief beat of silence before Regulus's eyes go wide. "No!" he gasps, James biting his lip to hold back a smirk. "No, he never! Tell me he hasn't!"

James only shrugs. "Listen, it is not my place to judge what your brother does or doesn't fantasize about."

"Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God," Regulus brings his hands up to cover his eyes, laughing as he shakes his head. "I can't believe he did that. I can't believe he TOLD you."

"Hey, the dorm room is a safe space," those words do something annoying to the pit of his stomach. It's only a joke, but there was a time when he would have meant it. He doesn't know what their dorm is now, but he certainly wouldn't call it safe.

"Well, your strategy has been neutralized now, because there's no way I'm getting a boner for the rest of my life with that image in my head."

"Shame that," James nuzzles at Regulus's neck, kissing it a few times before pulling back again. "Guess we'll just have to win the old fashioned way."

Regulus blinks, cheeks flushed from James's mouth. James has learned that necks are a particular weakness of Reg's. Breathing, touching, kissing—it all brings that slightly glazed look to his eyes.

"Old fashioned way?"

James nods, grinning even though he can feel the return of those nagging feelings in his gut. "Bribery and blackmail."

Regulus arches his brow. "Very Slytherin of you."

"Desperate times," he really does try to keep his voice light, playful. But tomorrow is the final Quidditch match of the season. Gryffindor versus Slytherin. And James can't fly.

Well, he can fly. Technically. He can get on his broom and get into the air but then—then it's just—because Sirius isn't there. And it shouldn't matter, their second-string beater is perfectly adequate. But James and Sirius have always been on the team together. Since they were twelve. And now flying without him feels like flying without his bloody right arm.

"Hey," Regulus says, tugging lightly on the collar of James's shirt to get his attention, "fuck him, okay? You're going to be brilliant."

James huffs. "Not if I play anything like I have been," he runs a hand through his hair, leaning back. "It's just...this is supposed to be my thing, you know? I'm supposed to be good at this."

"You are good," Regulus says vehemently. "It's honestly annoying how good you are."

"Apparently not on my own."

"You're not on your own, you have a whole team behind you."

James closes his eyes, dislodging his glasses as he massages the bridge of his nose. “I know, I know, it just—it doesn’t feel like it. It’s like there’s no one out there who can read me anymore, who has faith in me. I know it doesn’t actually make a difference, he was a beater, it’s not like I relied on him to pass me the Quaffle. But it just...made me a better player, knowing I was out there with someone who believed in me a hundred percent, no matter what stunt I pulled.”

There’s a pause, the cool air causing the forest to rustle behind them. “You can’t rely on other people to believe in you,” Regulus says eventually. James opens his eyes and finds Regulus’s stare trained on him.

“I know.”

“Don’t think, when you’re up there, about faces or names,” he can hear the competitiveness in Regulus’s voice, the same way he sees it in his body when he plays. The need to win. “They’re just players, pieces on a chess board, that’s it. Focus on the game.”

“Yes sir,” James considers saluting but decides against it. Regulus still rolls his eyes.

“I’m just saying. It doesn’t have to be personal.”

“It doesn’t have to be personal,” James repeats, pushing himself up so that their faces are close again, “the Regulus Black motto.”

“Okay, if you’re just going to mock me I’m not going to bother trying to help you.”

James bites back a smile at Regulus’s pouty expression, brushing their noses together. “You help me, you always help,” he kisses him, softly, slowly. All kissing is not the same, that’s something he’s learned with Regulus, having never kissed anyone else enough to understand the differences. It’s one of his favourite pastimes, figuring out all the different ways to open the other boy’s mouth. All the different ways to taste him.

“You are good James,” Regulus says when they break apart. “I mean that.”

James arches his brow. “Better than you?”

Regulus scoffs, though his eyes are all play. “You wish.”

James laughs and Regulus quickly brings their mouths back together.

“So loud,” he says into the kiss, pushing James onto his back again. The older boy pulls at his lower lip.

“Guess you’ll just have to shut me up then.”

Turns out, James is not at all good. In fact, he is very, very bad. Playing what may be the worst game of his entire life. And if the pinched look on Frank’s face is anything to go by, he thinks so too.

“Okay,” the older boy says, running a hand over his sweaty face. The game is running long so Hooch called for a break, which is why the Gryffindor team is currently gathered in the locker room, looking ragged and hopeless. “Listen, I know things aren’t good, but the game isn’t over yet, alright?”

Mary snorts, leaning up against the lockers, arms crossed over her chest. Frank sends her a sharp look but honestly, James doesn’t blame her. The Snitch hasn’t been caught, but Slytherin is currently leading 140 to 80. All eight goals scored by Mary, of course, because for some reason James can’t seem to keep his hands on the fucking ball.

“Beaters, I need you to be more aggressive, take more shots—nothing illegal—but the Chasers are getting too comfortable out there. Macdonald, good job on those goals, keep it up, Marlene—“

“I know, I know, I swear I’m looking,” Marlene is sitting with her elbows on her knees, head in her hands, sweat bleeding through her uniform.

Frank just nods, “Sometimes it’s like that, keep your eyes peeled, and stick close to Black. He moves, you move.”

“Yeah, cause that worked so well for Morrow,” Mary says dryly.

“You got anything helpful to add Macdonald?”

Mary doesn’t balk, sending Frank’s glare right back at him. “Yeah, actually, why doesn’t James help me the fuck out out there?”

James grimaces, hand tightening around his broom handle.

“Back off Mary,” Alice says, hand going to James’s arm and giving it a squeeze. James has no idea what Frank has told her about Sirius, but he’s grateful for the two of them either way.

“I’m just saying—“

“This is a team sport,” Frank interrupts. “The fate of this game isn’t up to one of us, if we’re doing poorly that’s on everyone in this room.”

Mary rolls her eyes. “Oh come on, there’s clearly one person who is monumentally fucking up more than the rest of us.”

“Merlin Mary, shut-up!” Alice snaps.

“Oi!” Marlene’s head pops up. “Don’t talk to her like that.”

“Then tell her to stop being such a cow.”

Mary laughs, pushing off the lockers and stepping forward. “You know what Alice, just because you’re screwing the Captain doesn’t mean you get to do whatever you want.”

“Okay that’s enough,” Frank tries to interject, but neither of the girls is paying any attention to him.

Alice smiles in a way that is not remotely pleasant. “Oh, you really don’t want to go there.” She tries to step forward too, but James grabs hold of her arm and pulls her back.

“Leave it Alice,” he says quietly.

She looks back at him, face flushed with indignation. Honestly, he’s not sure which of them is scarier—Mary or Alice—but he’s pretty sure he couldn’t take either of them in a fight.

“Look, James, I’m not trying to be a bitch,” Mary says bluntly, hands on her hips. “But come on, I’m right, no? You’re playing like garbage. I just don’t see what good it’s doing us to act like you aren’t.”

“Merlin Mary,” Marlene mutters under her breath.

“What?” Mary looks around the room. “Did I miss something? Potter’s a big boy, he can take it.”

Alice is still pulling against James’s grip, ready to fight.

“Macdonald—“

“You’re right,” James interrupts Frank. “I am playing like garbage.”

“Thank you!” Mary sighs, “So, stop fumbling the Quaffle and just pass it to me every time you get it, okay?”

James snorts, finding himself surprisingly appreciative of Mary’s “no bullshit” attitude.

“You got it Macdonald.”

“Great, now maybe we can close that fucking gap,” she looks around the room again.

“Everyone okay with that?”

There’s a beat of silence.

“Fine,” Frank says, running a hand over his face. “But James, you get a shot you take it, okay? Don’t second guess yourself.”

Frank is hoping that he’ll wake up. That he’ll suddenly be able to fly like there isn’t a chunk of him missing out there. Hell, he’s been hoping the same thing, trying to do what Regulus told him—to think of them as faceless players, pieces on a board. To not look for Sirius. But he just can’t quite manage it.

“Sure Frank.”

Before anyone else can speak there’s the ringing of a magically magnified voice in their ears.

“Teams back to the pitch, I repeat, the teams are now to return to the pitch.”

Frank looks back at them, eyes running over each of their haggard, sweaty faces. “We are a bloody good team, whatever happens out there. And I’m proud of each and every one of you.”

James feels his chest grow tight. This is Frank’s last chance to win the cup. And he’s fucking it up.

“You got it daddy Frank,” Marlene stretches, getting back on her feet.

As they start down the tunnel back towards the field, James realizes that, for the first time, maybe in his entire life, he doesn’t want to get on his broom.

The second half of the game is not going any better. James’s passes are sloppy, his aim off, and he keeps flinching every time he sees a goddamn Bludger. Luckily, the rest of his team is doing a bit less shit. Slytherin hasn’t scored anymore goals and Mary has managed to get in two. At least if they lose now it’ll be respectable. Which is not a thought James has ever had during a Quidditch match before. Usually he’s more of a fight to the bitter end kind of guy. But everything feels wrong this game. The team. Him. Nothing is meshing well, and he just wants to go back to his room and wash the whole thing out of his skin.

Mary makes an unsuccessful attempt on the Slytherin goal and the Keeper chucks the Quaffle well across the pitch, overshooting his mark, so that there’s no one on the receiving end. Normally James would revel in this—an easy steal. But the way this game is going, the Slytherin’s will have it out of his hands in no time. Still, he has to try, doesn’t he?

He’s almost got it when another set of hands come out of nowhere, snatching the Quaffle before he can reach it.

“What the hell is—sorry Professor—what the heck is going on here? The Slytherin Seeker has just taken possession of the Quaffle!” booms the commentators voice across the field.

James feels just as stunned as everyone else, staring at the dark haired boy hovering on the broom in front of him.

“Regulus—“

But Regulus doesn’t let him finish, grey eyes sharp. “You’re throwing a temper tantrum.”

James blinks. “What?”

“You’re mad that he’s not here so you’re throwing a temper tantrum. Stop it. You’re better than this.”

“I am not—“

“Just because it isn’t how you pictured it doesn’t mean it’s broken. And I’m tired of watching you give up,” his eyes scan the sky behind James, watching as the other players get closer.

“What the hell Black!” that’s one of the Slytherin’s—Zabini maybe?

“Stop harassing my Chaser!” that’s Frank.

“This is highly irregular folks, I quite honestly have no clue what’s going on—weird strategy on Slytherin’s part.”

Regulus’s eyes stop moving for a moment, locking on James. “I believe in you,” he says quietly.

The wind pushes against James, rocking him like a boat. “What?”

“You said you missed having someone out here who believes in you—who has faith in you,” he puts weight in his words, so that they don’t float away, so that James has to hear them. “I have faith in you.”

And then he’s gone, flying past James and sending the Quaffle careening over his head towards one of the Slytherin Chasers. James blinks, trying to get his bearings.

I have faith in you.

Those words bounce around his head. Those words set fires in his chest. And then, slowly, James feels himself smile.

“POTTER!” Frank shouts, as James turns his broom around. “Get your head in the fucking game!”

And he does. The rest of the game is brilliant. Hard flying, fast game plays, James is out of breath and beaming by the time it’s done. Gryffindor is leading 200 to 160 when Regulus catches the Snitch. It’s work for James to hide his smile at the sight, Reg with the golden ball held over his head, the stands going wild. They’ve lost and it sucks. Really. But fuck, it feels like the first time he’s really been able to fly in weeks.

“I’m sorry Frank,” Marlene says even before she’s off her broom. The team landing on the field, all sweating and red-faced. It was long game and the sun is starting to dip below the horizon, evening rolling in.

Frank shakes his head. “Don’t be, you played beautifully. You all did.”

It’s loud and chaotic, the Slytherin’s chanting in the stands, a few of them running onto the field along with Madame Hooch and Professor Slughorn. Green and Silver scarves are thrown onto the pitch.

“What the fuck did Black say to you and do I need to fight him?” Alice asks as she comes up beside James.

He laughs. “Nah, it was nothing,” he feels almost guilty about dismissing Reg like that—dismissing what he did.

I have faith in you.

He stopped a whole bloody Quidditch match, in front of the entire school, for James.

“I knew all you needed was a little antagonism,” Mary winks at him as she walks towards the locker room, squirting water into her mouth.

James laughs. “You trying to say that take down at halftime was all for my benefit?”

She turns around to face him, walking backwards. “Anything for you James, baby.” But there’s something not quite right—cold and sharp. It takes James by surprise, but before he can answer Alice beats him to it.

“You’re lucky you didn’t get socked in the face Macdonald,” there’s a playfulness to her voice as they start following after Mary.

“As if you’d dare Prewett.”

“Bad idea to bet against me, just ask Marlene.”

“She’s right,” Marlene admits, throwing her broom over her shoulder.

“Mar!”

“What? It is!”

James smiles at the three girls, hanging back so that he can walk with Frank.

“Alright Potter?” Frank asks, dragging his feet like he’s reluctant to leave the pitch.

James nods as they slowly come to a stop near the edge of the field, Frank looking out at it all with a wistful expression on his face. James watches for a moment before clearing his throat, foot kicking nervously at the ground.

“Listen, I reckon I owe you an apology.”

Frank looks over at him, eyebrow raised.

“I let you down out there.”

There’s a pause, in which James feels Frank’s eyes on him but can’t quite bring himself to meet them.

“You know,” the older boy says eventually. “Two years ago—hell—last year, if Mary had said the things she said to you today, you’d have lost it on her. There’d have been a bloody duel in my locker room. But the way you handled yourself today…” he shoots James a proud

smile. “You’ve always been a good player James, no doubt about it. But I was never convinced that you could actually lead the team, not until today.”

James blinks, brain suddenly going a mile a minute. “I—wait, am I—are you making me Captain?”

Frank smirks, just out of the corner of his mouth. “But you didn’t hear it from me. So do try to look surprised when the badge comes in the mail yeah?”

James nearly chokes on all the words that are trying to force their way out of his mouth. “Thank you.”

“You don’t need to thank me, you earned it. I’m excited to come back next year and see what you do with them. You’ve got a good core here, but it’ll be nice to get some fresh blood on the field.”

James only nods, still feeling a little stunned. For some reason he’d always assumed that the captaincy would go to Marlene. Her being the most patient and reasonable of the lot of them.

Beside him Frank takes in a deep breath, eyes scanning over the field one last time. “I got into the Auror program,” he says eventually.

James feels something tug on his gut. “So it’s official then, no more Quidditch.”

Frank nods, slowly. “It’s official.”

It shouldn’t bother James as much as it does. The Aurors is the right choice—the noble choice. But he can’t shake the feeling that it’s unfair.

“Alice too?” he finds himself asking.

“Yup.”

James bites down on his lower lip. “Be careful yeah?” his chest squeezes. Aurors always feel so big and scary and untouchable. Like you could throw them into anything and they would survive. Not like Frank and Alice. They’re just kids. Just his friends.

Frank drags his eyes away from the pitch and back to James. “You too.”

There’s more to say. There almost always is. But James has no idea what, and before he can figure it out Madame Hooch is shouting at him across the field.

“POTTER, here, now!”

James squints in her direction, there are still scattered groups of revelling Slytherin’s on the pitch, though the stadium has sufficiently emptied, only one or two straggles still left in the stands.

Frank lets out a low whistle. “She sounds pissed.”

“Yeah,” James grimaces, “think she’s figured out I’ve been stealing Snitches all year?”

Frank laughs, patting James on the shoulder as he turns down the hallway behind them and starts making his way inside. “Merlin help you if she has.”

That, James thinks, is wholly unhelpful.

Walking towards Madame Hooch, he realizes that he’s not the only one who’s been summoned. A spike of anxiety cutting through him that has nothing to do with stolen Snitches as he stops awkwardly across from Regulus.

“Mr. Black has something to say to you,” Hooch crosses her arms over her chest, eyes bouncing between the two boys, her gaze particularly harsh when it falls on Regulus.

“Er—okay?” James shifts his weight between his feet, feeling thoroughly uncomfortable. He can’t quite look at Regulus, not this close, not with Madame Hooch watching them.

“I’m sorry for my un-sportsman like behaviour,” Regulus says flatly.

James blinks. “What—“

“Your sincerity is truly inspiring Mr. Black, I’ll be taking fifty points from Slytherin. I’ve never seen such vicious behaviour on my pitch and I won’t tolerate it again, understood?”

“No—wait—Madame Hooch—“

But Regulus cuts him off, voice sharp. “I honestly was only making an observation, it’s hardly my fault that he was playing like a drunken baboon.”

James chokes, half-way between laughter and indignation. “A drunken baboon?” he arches his brow at Regulus, but the younger boy’s face is made of stone.

“Yes, thank you Mr. Black,” Madame Hooch says coldly. “Next time I’ll disqualify you.”

“Yes ma’am,” he says dryly.

Hooch gives him one last look over before turning to James, hand clapping his shoulder as she walks off; “Excellent turn around in the second half Potter, really brilliant flying.”

“Um...thanks?” he watches her walk away, brow knitting in confusion. “Regulus why—“

“Supply room,” Regulus whispers, quiet, direct, “past the locker rooms, on the left.” And then he turns on his heel, heading back towards his remaining teammates, leaving James feeling as though he’s just been hit with a stunning spell. He watches Regulus’s back for a moment before following what, he’s assuming, are instructions.

Frank is no longer at the entrance of the stadium, the hallway clear as James makes his way down the hall, finding the supply room on the left just like Regulus said. He doesn’t have his wand on him so the only light is from the small, high window on the far wall, illuminating

rows of well-used brooms and mismatched Quidditch gear. The ceiling and floor are grey, the room smelling very distinctly of sweat and leather.

James runs a hand through his damp hair, wondering exactly what he's meant to be doing, when the door opens behind him. He turns around and finds Regulus slipping through.

"Hey," he says, when Regulus doesn't speak, the two of them standing awkwardly in front of one another.

Regulus nods. He looks tense and the fact that James has no idea why is wiggling him out a little. "You can't tell people what I said to you during the game, you realize that right?"

James blinks. Oh. Of course. This is a PR meeting. "So what do I tell them?"

Regulus waves his hand in the air dismissively, and for some reason that irks James. "That I was taunting you, the specifics aren't important, though it's probably best if you choose one story and stick to it."

"You want me to tell everyone that you were being an asshole?"

"Yes."

James frowns, unsure why it bothers him so much. "I don't want to do that."

"You have to, it was a dumb thing for me to do in the first place, I wasn't—" Regulus shakes his head, looking off to the side for a moment before his gaze returns to James. "Look, it's what everyone will think anyway, so just go along with it okay?"

James thinks about Alice, and knows that Regulus is right.

"Well they shouldn't—the way that Hooch was treating you out there? That wasn't fair. I don't—you don't have to be the bad guy. I don't want people to think—"

"And what is the alternative?" neither of them have stepped any closer, the space between them poking holes in James's lungs. "Huh? Because people are going to ask and if you tell them the truth then they'll know that we're—" he cuts himself off. They've said they love each other but they haven't said much else. Like what they are. What they're doing. What it means.

"Would that be so bad?" James asks.

He sees Regulus's eyes widen, but not with shock, with anger. "Are you joking right now?"

"No."

Regulus stares at him for a minute, a look of complete disbelief washing over his face. "You're being ridiculous."

"I don't think so," he takes a step forward and Regulus instantly steps back, causing them both to freeze. James does his best to ignore the tightening in his chest. "What are you so

afraid of Reg?”

For a second the expressionless mask cracks and something so much more powerful than anger or irritation slips through. And then it's gone.

“You have no idea—I can't be—” he starts and then stops, shaking his head. “And anyway, it doesn't matter. I told you—I told you before this started.”

“This?” James repeats, a new edge to his voice. “What's ‘this’ Reg? What are we doing? Huh? What am I to you, exactly?”

He can see Regulus's chest rising and falling like he's still playing the game. Still trying to outmaneuver an opponent. “Don't start James,” he says finally. “I told you that this had to be secret. You agreed,” that last word is ground out of him, almost desperate sounding.

“I'm not the one who flew up to you in the middle of a Quidditch match,” he shoots back, petulantly.

Regulus pinches the bridge of his nose. “All I am asking,” his voice carefully level, “is that you confirm their biases.”

“And I'm just telling you, that I don't want to go around bashing you to everyone.”

“Oh get over yourself,” he drops his hand. “It's not as though you've never done it before. My brother, I'm sure, has given you plenty of opportunities to practice.”

Now it's James's turn to take a step back. That attack taking him by surprise, in no small part, because it's true.

Eventually Regulus sighs, breaking the new silence that's grown up around them. “James, please. I'm asking you. I made a mistake—a miscalculation—I wasn't thinking. I need you to do this for me.”

It's not fair really. Not with the desperation in his voice, his words. He needs him. And really, that's all James has ever wanted. To be needed. “Okay,” he says quietly, “fine, if that's what you want.”

Regulus nods curtly, “It's what I want.”

Another beat of silence.

“I should go,” Regulus's voice is clipped, grey eyes somewhere distant, somewhere not on James.

“Reg?” he stops him with his hand on the door, the younger boy looks back over his shoulder but doesn't turn around. “It meant something to me, what you did out there. So just—” there's an unnecessary strain in his voice and he coughs, trying to make himself sound normal. “Just don't call it a mistake, okay?”

Something uncomfortable and heavy grows in James's chest as he waits for an answer, enduring a silence that stretches on too long. Eventually Regulus nods. "Okay," he turns back to the door but doesn't open it, hand still tightly gripping the handle. After several seconds he sighs, like he's giving up. Losing the fight. When he turns back around his eyes are softer than before.

"Don't—just—stay still alright? Don't touch me."

Surprised, James nods, clasping his hands behind his back in a way that Regulus can see, the younger boy approaching him slowly. Regulus's curls are long enough now to be messy after the game, his cheeks still flushed, making his eyes stand out—the grey bright and intense, trained on James's face. When they come toe to toe Regulus pauses for a moment, looking at James intently before rising up on the balls of his feet to press a quick kiss to his lips. The touch is soft, and when he pulls away both of them are breathing heavy.

"I got distracted watching you," Regulus says quietly, and James can tell that it costs him something, to give up that truth, "usually I can tune everything out when I'm flying, that's why I love it so much, but you—all that time I was supposed to be looking for the Snitch and I couldn't take my eyes off of you."

James feels his breath hitch, he knows what this is. An apology. An olive branch. James almost tells Regulus that it isn't necessary, except that he doesn't want Regulus to move. To hide behind his walls again. They aren't touching, James's hands still behind his back, but they're close. And there's something about the soft tones of Regulus's voice, low and gravelly, that send shocks of electricity through him.

"You take it on too easily," James says eventually, when he's certain he'll be able to keep his voice under control. Regulus sends him a questioning look so he continues. "The role of the villain, like you think you deserve it. Like you're trying to atone for something. Your family's guilt isn't your own Regulus, you don't have to bear it. You aren't them."

Something complicated is happening in the other boy's eyes, and James wishes he knew what it was.

"Sometimes," his voice gets even quieter, eyes closing, "I think I was born with blood on my hands."

James wants so desperately to reach out, to pull him close, to hold him. But he doesn't. Because Regulus doesn't want that. Because he trusts James not to.

"You've been saving me," he says instead, the next best thing. If he can't wrap him in his arms he'll wrap him in his words. "These past few weeks, everything that's been going on with Sirius, if it weren't for you I'd be sunk," he takes in a deep breath, leaning closer but still not touching, it's Regulus who ends up bringing their foreheads together. "You're not bad Regulus."

The other boy lets out a dry laugh. "Maybe," there are fault lines in his voice, ready to shake him apart, "but I don't think I'm good either."

“Reg,” James whimpers, voice breaking. He has no idea what they’ve been telling him at Grimmauld Place, but he knows it’s fucked him up, made him think he’s something he isn’t. It hurts, he realizes, to love someone who can’t love themselves. Like watching a work of art set itself on fire.

They stay like that, frozen, pressed together. James closes his eyes and listens to Regulus breathe, surprised by how comforting it is. He doesn’t know how much time passes before Regulus steps back.

“You’re my person,” he says suddenly, like it’s a struggle. Talking always is for him.

James blinks. “What?”

“You wanted to know what you are to me,” Regulus explains, flush high in his cheeks. “You’re my person. You’re mine.”

James feels a smile tug at his mouth, something fluttering in his stomach. “Okay Reg,” he says warmly, “yeah, I’m yours. You’re mine too.”

The other boy nods, exhaling, like he’d been worried. James can’t imagine why. He’s completely gone on the kid, he thought he’d made that clear.

“I won’t be able to get away tonight,” Regulus goes on awkwardly.

“I figured.”

“Tomorrow?”

James nods, “tomorrow.”

This time Regulus doesn’t pause at the door.

The locker room is empty by the time James gets there. He doesn’t mind, he feels a little raw. He needs time to pull himself together before talking to anyone. It isn’t that it’s bad exactly, just...intense. But then, it always is with Reg.

He thinks of all the art—paintings and music and plays—about love. Lines and lines dedicated to trying to get this feeling out. Metaphors and similes, blended colours and golden frames. Trying to make it into something that can be spoken and seen and touched. James thinks he gets that now, at least a little bit. The desperate desire to take the swelling inside his chest and say “look, it’s real.”

“James!”

It is clear, the minute he walks through the portrait hole into the common room, that the Gryffindor team has spent the time since he last saw them getting drunk. Well, the team and company. Peter and Remus are there, along with Lily. His eyes meet her’s briefly before

looking away. They still haven't spoken since that day on the lawn and James isn't sure he's up for anymore confrontation today.

"You lot certainly seem to be having a good time," he smiles, though, quite honestly, he'd like nothing more than to go upstairs and sleep for several hours.

"We're mourning," Mary says, holding up a half-empty bottle of something James can't recognize but assumes is alcoholic.

"Ah," he says, dropping his bag and sitting next to Remus.

"Sorry, about the game," Remus presses into his side just enough to be comforting before pulling away.

"Thanks," someone hands him a bottle and he takes it without thinking, though he doesn't really feel like drinking.

"To Frank," Mary hoists her drink in the air, all brown curls and red lips and devilish eyes, "the most anal-retentive captain at Hogwarts."

There are a few laughs and "here, heres," everyone raising their own glasses and taking a drink, the alcohol burns on its way down James's throat. He really needs to get something to eat. He's not sure when the last time he had food was—this morning?

"To Mary," Frank returns, Alice between his legs, leaning back against his chest, "the biggest pain in my ass."

Mary throws her head back and laughs as the rest of them raise their glasses again. More burning liquid pooling in James's stomach. He doesn't know why he feels so off.

"I'd have thought that title would go to James," Remus says playfully.

Mary snorts. "Please, Frank and James are basically the same person."

"Not quite the same I don't think," Frank says dryly. "For starters, I'm pretty sure I've never had detention."

"Jesus, really?" James asks. "Blimey, what've you been doing the last seven years? Sleeping?"

Alice giggles. "Some of us are just smart enough not to get caught."

"Smart enough or not bold enough?" James asks with a grin.

"Alright, alright, settle down children," Mary says from her perch on the arm of the sofa, lording over the rest of them on the floor. "I meant when it comes to quidditch. They're both big nerds."

"I believe the term you're looking for is top tier athletes," James says primly.

“I’ll drink to that,” Frank sends James a smile, tipping his bottle to him.

“I still can’t believe I missed that bloody Snitch,” Marlene is sitting at Mary’s feet, knees pulled up, head in her hands, and at least two empty drinks bedside her.

“Oh are you still on that?” Mary says, looking down at her friend with extreme disinterest. “Really darling, it’s done. Move on.”

But Marlene only makes an aggravated noise. “We could have won—if I’d just been a little faster—“

“McKinnon,” Frank leans around Alice to put his hand on Marlene’s arm. “It’s okay, you’re a brilliant Seeker, you’ll get them next year, yeah?”

Marlene scrunches her nose. “But you won’t be here,” she says thickly.

“O-kay,” Mary reaches down and takes the drink right out of her hand. “That’s enough for you, you bloody lightweight.”

“Mar, baby, look at me,” Alice says, leaning forward. Marlene turns her big eyes on the older girl. Her big red eyes.

“Jeez,” James whispers to Remus. “How long were you guys drinking before I got here?”

Remus snorts. “Not long, she’s just been pounding them back—it was impressive honestly.”

“We do not,” Alice’s voice cuts across the room, she’s taken hold of Marlene’s hands and is looking at her very intently, “win Quidditch games for boys.”

Marlene snuffles, nodding her head. “Right, yeah,” but that only lasts for about a minute before another frustrated groan rips out of her and she pulls away from Alice, collapsing onto her back. “I can’t believe I didn’t see it!”

“There, there,” Mary nudges her with her foot in what James thinks is supposed to be a consoling gesture.

“Stupid Regulus Black,” Marlene mumbles, arm now thrown over her face.

“I’ll drink to that,” Alice says, a general mumbling of agreement sweeping around the circle. For a second James thinks he feels Remus go stiff beside him but he can’t figure out why. Maybe because Regulus makes him think of Sirius? James doesn’t know, and he’s too tired to figure it out, downing the rest of his bottle before looking for a new one.

“I still can’t believe that little twerp had the audacity to fuck with you like that,” Alice says, and James can hear the anger in her voice. She’s always been too much of a mama bear for her own good.

“What did he say anyway?”

It takes a second before James realizes that the question is directed at him, and that every set of eyes in the circle is now turned in his direction. Of course, he knew that Regulus had been right, that conversations would inevitably end up here. But somehow he still feels unprepared.

Eventually James shrugs, a motion he hopes looks more natural than it feels. “Don’t remember, wasn’t really paying attention,” he takes a deep pull of his drink.

Mary arches her brow, “That bad huh?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“But it’s bad enough that you don’t want to tell us what it was?” Peter pipes up, unhelpfully.

“I didn’t say that either,” James growls.

“Maybe we should talk about something else?” Remus looks around hopefully. And not for the first time, James thanks the gods for Remus bloody Lupin.

“Wait, wait, now I’m intrigued,” Alice leans further forward in Frank’s lap, a look in her eyes that says she’s not about to let this go. “What did he say James? Cause whatever it was, it got you playing like a rockstar.”

James looks at her for a long minute before leaning forward himself. “Who says my playing had anything to do with him? Remember Alice, we do not win Quidditch games for boys.”

She cackles, clinking her glass against his as she falls back against Frank’s chest. “Touché.”

“Was it about Lily?”

Everyone looks up at Mary who’s now considering James thoughtfully.

“Don’t bring me into this,” says Lily, who, up until this point, has been uncharacteristically quiet. She’s sitting against the side of the armchair, knees bent and pulled up, bottle hanging between them.

James looks at her and then away. “No,” he says bluntly.

But, of course, Mary can’t let it go. If anything, his flat denial seems to egg her on, that same sharp look in her eyes that he noticed on the field. The one that doesn’t feel like joking.

“I bet it was.”

“Why would Black interrupt a Quidditch game just to rib James about Lily?” Frank asks skeptically, and while James appreciates the sentiment, he really doesn’t think audience participation is going to help the situation.

Mary shrugs, “It’s a well known weakness.”

“I told you, he didn’t,” James says flatly.

“Then what did he say?” she pushes.

James rolls his eyes. “I don’t know, something about how shit I am. Does it matter?”

“Oh wow,” Alice says suddenly, the spark back in her eyes, making James’s stomach squirm, “you’re lying.”

“I am not,” James is starting to feel a little desperate now.

“I really think we should change the subject,” Remus tries again. “Frank, Alice, when do you guys start Auror training?”

But it’s too late.

“Makes sense that you wouldn’t want to tell us if he said something horrible about her,” Mary goes on.

“I told you to leave me out of this,” Lily says again.

“And I told you that he didn’t say shit about Lily,” James grumbles, somehow finishing off his second drink. He reaches for another.

“Maybe you should slow down,” Remus says quietly.

“If I have to deal with her,” he motions jerkily in Mary’s direction as he grabs another bottle. “I’m going to need more alcohol.”

“What was it Potter? Come on, I’ll never sleep if I don’t know.”

“It couldn’t have been that bad, could it?” Alice asks, intrigued. “Regulus has always seemed pretty harmless to me.”

“I don’t know about that,” Remus says quietly, which surprises James.

“What?” he turns to his friend. “What do you mean?”

Remus looks thoroughly uncomfortable, like he hadn’t meant to let that slip out. “Nothing, never mind.”

“I’m with Lupin,” Mary says, “the quiet ones are always the ones with sharpest teeth.”

“Oh, piss-off would you?” James says, now starting to get angry.

“But why not just tell us what he said?” Peter asks.

“Pete,” Remus shoots him a silencing look.

“Had to be some death eater nonsense,” Mary goes on, eyes intently on James, clearly enjoying how uncomfortable this is making him. “Let me guess, he called her a Mudblood?”

“He’s not Snape,” James snaps back, and the room suddenly goes quiet. A moment passing where they all seem to be holding their breath.

“Well fuck you both,” Lily says finally, getting to her feet and storming out of the common room.

“Lily!” Marlene calls after her, but the redhead doesn’t turn around. “Jesus Mary,” Marlene hisses when the portrait closes behind her, “was that necessary?”

Mary shrugs, though James doesn’t quite believe she feels as indifferent about it as she’s making it seem. “I didn’t know she was still so touchy about it.”

Marlene lets out a deep sigh before collapsing onto her back again.

“I should go check on her,” Alice says eventually, patting Frank on the leg as she starts to get to her feet.

“No,” James takes a mouthful of his drink before setting it down and getting up himself. “I’ll go.”

No one looks particularly confident about that plan.

“James, are you sure you—“

“I said it,” already moving towards the corridor. “I’ll go.”

At first he worries he won’t be able to find her. He doesn’t have the map, and, truth be told, he has no idea where Lily Evans goes when she’s upset. Luckily, the corridors are mostly empty, and he only has to wander around for a few minutes before he spots a red head sitting in one of the windows.

“Go away please,” she says wearily, not even bothering to check who it is.

James, predictably, does not go away. Instead he leans against the wall next to the window.

“Look, I’m sorry for bringing him up okay? Mary was just—“

“Being a bitch, yes, I know. She’s angry.”

That surprises James, knocking him off course for a second. “Angry?”

Lily sighs. “She’s worked really hard to be as good as she is at Quidditch.”

James blinks, feeling lost. “Er—okay. I get that, losing sucks.”

Lily laughs dryly, shaking her head. “She isn’t angry about losing.”

“Then what is she—“

“This was going to be her game,” Lily says, with the air of someone who is having to explain something very simple to someone very, very stupid. “For once, she was the star, she was scoring the goals and you were—“

“Playing like shit, yeah, I know.”

Lily rolls her eyes, but doesn't look away from the window. “Then all of the sudden you—I don't know—woke up, stole the show the way you do. Now all anyone can talk about is your bloody comeback and all that work she did for the first half of the game is forgotten. So she's pissed, but she's also Mary, so she can't just shout about it like the rest of us. She has to pretend she doesn't care. That she's above it all. God forbid she actually care about something, it'd ruin her reputation.”

“I—okay,” he fidgets against the wall, unsure of what to do with any of this information. Though he supposes it does help explain why Mary's been having a go at him all bloody day. “I guess I don't really see how any of that is my fault?”

Lily sighs, forehead leaning against the glass. “It isn't. It's just...infuriating.”

James blinks, looking down at her, long red hair braided down her back, green eyes reflected in the glass “I'm infuriating?” he asks.

“It's all infuriating.”

“What is?”

She shakes her head, finally sitting up straight and looking at him properly, eyes sharp. “All of it. We—we come here at such a disadvantage. We've never seen magic before, never even known it existed, and then suddenly we're thrown into these classes with people like you who have been here their whole lives and it's like we're always playing catch-up.”

James tries to keep up with her. “When you says ‘we’ you mean—“

“Muggle-borns, yes. Or Mudbloods I guess, the amount that people are throwing that word around these days it might as well be a bloody nickname.” James flinches, but Lily doesn't give him the chance to respond. “Mary has to work twice as hard as you do to be on that team. The first time she saw a broom, flew on one, she was eleven, by which time I'm sure you'd been flying as long as you'd been walking,” which James has to admit, it's not an inaccurate statement. “She can't practice when she goes home for the summer, or Christmas, hell she doesn't even have her own broom because she can't bloody afford it.”

The words pour out of Lily and James realizes that they've been building in her for quite some time.

“None of that is your fault, I understand. You were born a Pureblood, you were born wealthy, you can't help it. But sometimes it's fucking aggravating. Especially when you walk around acting like we're all equals, because we aren't. Because we never will be. No one will ever look at you and decide that they can't be seen with you anymore because of your fucking blood,” her voice breaks on that last word and she looks away again. Leaving James shaken.

It feels like a long time that they stay like that, not speaking or moving, neither of them even bothering to make eye contact. Eventually he sits down beside her, elbows on his knees, hands clasped between them.

“It scares me,” he says finally.

“What does?” Lily asks.

He exhales. “How easy it is, for me to hurt people. Because I can’t always see it—I didn’t—I never thought about how much longer I’ve been flying than Mary, just because of who I am. We don’t use magic before we turn eleven, before we come here, so I never saw it as an advantage. But you’re right, of course, I might not have been using it, but I was around it, I understood it.”

He swallows, running a hand over his face. He can feel Lily’s eyes on him but he doesn’t look at her, staring intently at the wall across from him.

“Sirius hurt Remus,” he says finally, voice straining.

“I know,” Lily says, though James is well aware that she can’t possibly—at least not really.

“I’m so fucking mad at him, you know? But part of me is terrified too. Because Sirius and I, we’re more similar than we are different. And I don’t believe for a second that he meant it—that he meant to hurt Remus. But he did anyway. Because he didn’t see it—see how this is all different for Remus—more fragile. And I’m scared that I could make that mistake too. That I make it all the time, without even realizing.”

James still hasn’t figured out whether it makes it harder or easier to forgive Sirius, being certain that he would never consciously hurt Remus. Does intent matter when the wounds you’ve made are so big?

Eventually he hears Lily groan, shifting so that they sit side by side, backs to the window. “It’s really irritating how difficult you make it to stay angry with you.”

James snorts. “Do you want to be angry with me?”

Lily pull her mouth to the side, thinking. “Sometimes, maybe. Simpler that way, isn’t it?”

“I guess.”

A beat of silence passes before James manages to speak again.

“I’m not sorry about punching Snape,” he says, pushing on even when he feels Lily stiffen beside him. “I don’t like him, I don’t think he’s a good guy, but—but I know that I went about things wrong, that day on the lawn. That I ...created a situation that was...volatile. And that you got hurt because of that,” he turns to her now, their eyes meeting. “That I am sorry for.”

There is nothing weak or delicate about Lily Evan’s stare. It is all fight. She has the type of eyes you go to war with.

“Okay,” she says eventually. “Thank you.”

James nods, and then, after a brief pause, gets back to his feet. “This mean we’re friends again?” he asks, hands in his pockets.

She smiles. “Sure Potter, we’re friends.”

“Good,” he smiles back. “I missed having you around Evans.”

And he means it.

When he gets back to the common room Marlene, Alice and Frank are in the middle of a blow out argument about Quidditch teams. The specifics are hard to work out but James definitely hears the words “Chudley Cannons” followed by “no loyalty” and “couldn’t catch a Snitch if it bit him in the face.”

“They’re really going at it, huh?” James pulls up next to Mary, who is still perched on the sofa.

She nods, bringing her drink to her lips. “It would be interesting if they weren’t all completely wrong.”

James snorts, watching as a very red faced Marlene gets on her knees, hands gesticulating as she explains why the Chuddley Cannons will never take the cup without a proper Seeker.

“How is she?” Mary asks eventually, voice pitched low.

James looks over at her but but her eyes are still on the fight below them.

“She’s alright, yeah.” James realizes then that he doesn’t really have any idea what the girls’ friendships are like. He assumes they’re close, but he doesn’t actually know.

“Listen, James, about earlier,” Mary goes on, sounding as though she’d rather have her teeth pulled than continue this conversation. “I didn’t mean to pry—well, actually, I very much did mean to pry, but I probably shouldn’t have.”

James waves her words away. “Don’t worry about it,” and then; “listen, thanks for—thanks for picking up the slack today. That game would have been really fucking embarrassing if it hadn’t been for you.”

She looks at him out of the corner of her eye, giving him a sharp smile. “Oh I know.”

He snorts. “Good,” that’s when he notices that Peter’s sitting alone, “talk to you later yeah?” he absentmindedly pats Mary’s shoulder as he maneuvers his way over to the other marauder, crouching down beside him.

“Good to see Lily didn’t dismember you,” Pete says with a smirk.

“O ye of little faith,” James sing-songs, earning him a low laugh. “Hey, where’s Moony at?” he watches the tightening of Peter’s eyes.

“Er—he went to bed.”

James’s eyebrows raise, surprised. “Bed? It’s barely eight?”

Peter only shrugs, though his mouth has formed a firm line. “That’s what he said.”

“Wormtail,” James pushes, eyes running him over. “What happened?”

Peter shoots him a sidelong look. “Sirius—came by.”

James swears every muscle in his body grows tense at those words. “What’d he do?”

“Nothing,” Peter shakes his head. “Mary told him to sit down, and he said he had homework to do and ran up the stairs. But—uh—well, you know. Moony got pretty quiet after that. And then said he was tired.”

Is this how it’s going to be now? James thinks, with an ache in the pit of his stomach. Avoiding each other for the next two years?

“I thought about going up to check on him, but—I don’t know—it’s hard to tell with him these days, whether he wants us around or not,” Peter goes on, driving the blade in a little deeper.

“Yeah,” James croaks, slapping him on the back. “You stay here, I’ll go.”

Peter looks worried but nods, “Let me know if there’s anything I can do, yeah?”

“Sure Pete,” James says, sparing their friends a brief look, just enough to confirm they’re all too engrossed in the debate to notice him leave. And then he slips up the stairs.

The room is dark when he walks in, and for a moment he thinks that maybe Remus really did go to sleep, but then he sees him. Standing by his bed, book in one hand, bottle in the other. He doesn’t recognize the book—he thinks it might be muggle—but Remus isn’t exactly reading it, just, looking.

“Hey Moons,” James says softly, leaning against the bedpost opposite him.

Remus doesn’t look up. “I’m so tired of feeling like this,” he says quietly, making James’s heart squeeze.

“I know.”

Remus gives the book in his hand one last look before chucking it on his bed and bringing the bottle to his lips, chugging it back.

“Merlin, now who needs to slow down?” James laughs nervously, watching as Remus wipes his mouth on the back of his hand.

“It’s supposed to help right?” he squeezes his eyes shut. “I just need something to make it—I just need something to make it stop.”

“Remus,” James says softly.

Remus’s eyes open, bright in the shine from the moon outside. “It’s what you were trying to do earlier, right?”

James blinks, taking in the slightly unstable posture of his friend. “Er—don’t know what you mean.”

“You were trying to forget him.”

Something slightly uneasy flutters through James’s stomach. “Forget who, mate?”

Remus stares at him long and hard for a moment before exhaling. “Nothing. No one. Never mind.” He holds out the bottle to James who takes it without thinking. “I’m going to bed,” he doesn’t bother with his clothes, just shucks off his shoes before crawling onto his mattress.

“It’ll get easier you know,” James says helplessly. “We’ll figure it out.”

“You think?” Remus says skeptically, then he squeezes his eyes shut again, pressing his face into his pillows. “You want to know what the worst part is?” words muffled by the bed.

No, James thinks, isn’t this bad enough? “Sure Moons,” he says instead.

“Sometimes I don’t even care—don’t care what he’s done, don’t care that it was wrong. Sometimes I think I’d let him do anything he wanted to me just as long as I still got to be around him. As long as he was still mine sometimes.”

Those words burn all the way down. “I’m sorry,” is all James says, all that he has left.

“Everyone’s sorry,” Remus mutters. “Everyone’s always sorry and none of it ever makes a difference. I fucking hate that word,” his voice is heavy and slow, eyes still shut. It’s clear that sleep is sneaking up on him.

James sighs, moving back towards the door when Remus stops him. “No don’t—“ his voice calls out and James looks back to see him curled on his side, eyes wide open. “Stay—can you stay, just for a few minutes?” He sounds so small.

“Course Moony,” James gives him a weak smile he isn’t sure he can see, “always.”

He puts the bottle down on his bedside table before lying on his own bed, face towards the ceiling. “I know you don’t believe me,” he says after a few minutes, voice soft. He’s not sure how much Remus is listening. “But I’m going find us a way out of this. I don’t know what it is yet, but it won’t be like this forever, okay? I won’t let it be.”

He waits for a few moments before turning his head, finding Remus’s eyes closed.

Chapter End Notes

Hello beautiful people!

Finally, we get some Jegulus in this Jegulus fic!

Also, so many scenes in this chapter were just completely rewritten, like originally that bit in the supply room involved a lot more kissing and the chapter ended with James drunk and Remus comforting him, it was truly a wild ride.

I am so glad that people care about this fic because I care about this fic so thanks as always for your comments, love to know what you think!

Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

Summer '76 babyyyyyy

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

James spent the last night before summer holidays with Regulus. They laid on their backs, Regulus's fingers tracing the lines of his palm and the veins of his arm, causing every inch of his skin to tingle and spark to life. Over sensitive under Regulus's barely-there touches. They talked a little, they kissed a lot, Regulus had that faraway look in his eyes—like he was already back in London. Already trying to close off parts of himself. James tried not to notice. Not to let it hurt. But, of course, it did anyway.

It was late when he finally said it, not sure why he had waited so long; “I have something for you.”

He pulled out a stack of letters, eight to be precise, one for every week of summer.

“I thought about writing one for every day,” he laughed, rubbing the back of his neck. “But it seemed excessive.”

Regulus stared at the envelopes in his hands, running them over, like he couldn't quite believe they were real. “I'm not sure I understand...” he said finally.

“Well I know—I know I can't send you post, over the summer, so, I thought I'd give them to you now.”

Regulus blinked up him. “Give them to me now?”

“They're all dated,” James went on, “so you can read them like I'm sending them to you in real time. I just thought...” he trailed off, shrugging. “I didn't want you to be alone all summer,” after another long pause he dropped his eyes, more nervous laughter. “Maybe that's dumb—actually—now that I'm saying it out loud it's definitely dumb. Sorry, you don't have to—“

Regulus kissed him then. It had been a big kiss—full of feelings and words and desperation. All James could do was take it. Was hold him.

“Thank you,” Regulus said, when they finally came up for air. “I love them. I love you.”

Several weeks later, lying on his bed in his childhood home, James runs over that memory for the hundredth time. The way it had felt to hear Regulus say those words again—without needing to be forced or asked. Like they came naturally to him. He closes his eyes and tries to imagine the feel of the other boy's lips, the weight of him in his hands. He doesn't know if Regulus is okay, if he's read any of the letters, if he's thinking about James the way James is thinking about him. Constantly. Incessantly. He feels raw with all the things he doesn't know.

"JAMES!" his mother shouts, even though there are a dozen spells and a house elf who all could have communicated with him more efficiently, "BREAKFAST."

James slides out of bed, already dressed but reluctant to leave his room. Sirius hasn't tried to talk to him since they've been here, but that doesn't mean it isn't still incredibly uncomfortable to be in the same room as him. Part of James, the petty childish part, is mad at Sirius for not trying harder. He should be bending over backwards to make this right. He should be begging for James's forgiveness. For Remus's. For Peter's. Instead, he's just gone silent, keeping his eyes down and his face hidden behind a curtain of dark hair. Like he's trying to disappear.

James drops into his chair at the kitchen table, Sirius in the seat across from him, eyes trained on his breakfast. It's bright out, has been almost every day this week, skies clear and sun fat in the sky. It's aggravating, since James is not feeling particularly sunny at the moment.

"Well look who it is, risen from the dead," his mother chirps as she drops a plate of eggs and toast in front of him, giving his head a quick kiss. "Have you boys got any plans for today?" she sweeps around the kitchen, brewing coffee with the twirl of one hand and sending dishes into the sink with the brush of another.

Though he wouldn't have thought it possible, he thinks he sees Sirius curl further in on himself. His mother insists on acting as though everything is fine—as though they'll wake up one morning and it'll all be forgotten. Like Sirius didn't fucking betray each and every one of them.

"Going to Remus's," he says tersely, shoving eggs into his mouth like they've personally offended him.

"Both of you?"

"No."

He glares across the table at Sirius, daring him to say something, but he just keeps staring at his plate, barely touching his food.

"Don't you think—"

"Mum," he cuts her off, "leave it."

He meets her gaze, her stare not nearly as lighthearted and carefree as her tone would suggest. After a few moments of intense eye contact she sighs. "When will you be back?"

James shrugs, barely tasting the food he's eating, just desperate to finish and get away from this table and out of this house. He's spent nearly every day this summer at Remus's, which James knows Remus hates but there's nothing to be done for it. They can't hang out at Pete's—his mother is really weird about having people in her house, as in, she hates it and they're not allowed. And they can't come here for obvious reasons, so the Lupin's is their only option.

James actually quite likes Remus's house—a small farm in the Welsh countryside. James has always thought it a crime that Remus hasn't got an accent but he claims he doesn't actually speak to any Welsh people, and since neither of his parents are from there originally he's never picked it up.

James wipes his mouth on the back of his hand before standing and dumping his plate in the sink.

"Merlin James, where's the fire?" his mum laughs.

"Gotta catch the Portkey," he says blandly, kissing her quickly on the cheek and not sparing Sirius a single glance.

He slips on his trainers at the front door before pushing outside, not even bothering to do up his laces. Instantly he feels lighter, even as the early August heat sticks to his skin. Lately that house is full of all the things he can't fix—promises he hasn't kept. He told Remus it wouldn't always be like this and he meant it. He just hasn't quite figured out how yet.

There are a couple Portkeys set up in the area, leaving at designated times throughout the day. It's not a terrible way to travel but it's also not the most convenient. The Portkey only gets him to Wales and then he has to take a muggle bus to Remus's. He's become quite familiar with muggle transportation this summer. Far more familiar than he ever wanted to be, if he's being honest. Not that he'd never used it before of course, his mum used to take him into London when he was little, before Hogwarts. Day trips to the museums and parks and things, so he'd ridden the tube a few times. But public transport in a major city and public transport in the middle-of-nowhere-Wales, are two very different experiences, James has come to learn.

The bus takes ages, of course, and then there's still another twenty minute walk from the road to Remus's front door. By the time he gets there James is drenched in sweat and the day is half-gone.

"Oh, hello James," Hope opens the door for him. "You look knackered, come in, come in," she waves him inside. "Can I get you anything? Lemonade?"

"Yes, please, that would be brilliant," he tries not to sound too desperate, but she smiles at him like she knows.

"Where's Remus?" he asks, following her into the kitchen. James is completely obsessed with the Lupin's kitchen. It's full of muggle appliances he's never seen before. Like a fridge—which apparently keeps things cold no matter what the temperature is outside?! James has asked Remus multiple times but he swears it isn't magic. There's also a microwave that

instantly heats up your food—also, allegedly, not magic—and an iron that makes waffles. Brilliant, James thinks, all of it.

“Remus is out back,” Hope smiles as she hands him a cold glass of lemonade that he proceeds to gulp down like he’s just spent a week in the desert. Hope arches her brow, smiling in a way that looks so much like Remus it’s almost scary.

“Another?” she asks.

James chews on his bottom lip like he’s actually considering saying no. “If you don’t mind?”

She laughs. “I don’t mind,” Hope Lupin, James has learned this summer, is infinitely more relaxed when a) her husband isn’t home and b) she isn’t surrounded by Wizards. Well, adult wizards anyway. She doesn’t seem to mind James and Peter so much, but the one time his mother came to apparate him home he noticed her getting jumpy again. James doesn’t think it’s prejudice or anything. It feels more like fear.

He can’t imagine what that must be like. To be married to someone you’re afraid of. To have a son you’re afraid of. He knows Remus feels it, the constant humming of fear beneath his mother’s skin. Like she’s expecting to be attacked. Though he imagines some of that is Fenrir’s fault.

“It’s been so nice having you boys over so much this summer,” she says as she returns his refilled glass. “Usually we barely get to see Rem, he’s at your place so much.”

James smiles, nodding noncommittally.

“It’s a shame Sirius hasn’t been able to join you, but then, it’s good for a teenage boy to have a summer job. I always worked in the summers, at my father’s shop.”

James freezes mid-swallow. “Er—“ he chokes back the last of his lemonade, looking uncertainly at Hope. “Sorry? What was that about Sirius?”

“His job, at the Quidditch shop in Diagonal Alley or whatever it’s called. Remus told me that’s why he hasn’t been around this summer.”

She’s still smiling at him, though it feels a little forced, and James suddenly has the intense desire to get out of this kitchen.

“Right, yeah—yeah, no that’s...true. Definitely true. He’s been really busy. At his...job.” he rubs nervously at the back of his neck, trying to understand why Remus would lie about that. “Well, I should,” he nods towards the back door.

“Of course, let me know if you need anything. Plenty more lemonade and snacks. Feel free to help yourself.”

“Right, thanks,” James says, before quickly turning around and bolting out of the house.

The Lupin’s garden is just an untended field. It might have grown crops at some point, but now it mostly grows wildflowers and weeds. James cuts his way through it, sun beating

down, eyes peeled for a sandy blond head. Eventually he spots it, under the only tree for a mile, right at the edge of the property.

“Could you have gone any further, Jesus Christ,” he wheezes when he finally makes it up to him.

Remus is leaning against the trunk, dark shades pushed up into his hair, book in his lap. The bastard barely even looks up.

“If I’m any closer to the house she comes out every five minutes to check on me,” he says flatly, James collapsing onto the ground in a sweaty heap. “Mind you, I don’t know what she’s so worried about. I’ve already been bitten by a werewolf.”

James lets out a bark of laughter. “Jeez, in a real chipper mood today aren’t we?”

Remus just shrugs, going back to his book as James tries to catch his breath.

“Speaking of your mum,” he says eventually, pushing himself up onto his elbows so he can look at his friend properly. “Why did you tell her that Sirius has a summer job?”

Remus groans, letting his head fall back against the trunk behind him. “Because she wouldn’t stop asking why he hasn’t been over.”

James feels like he’s missed something. “Surely she knows why? She was was there in Dumbledore’s office.”

“Yeah, but as far as she’s concerned that never happened.”

James blinks. “What?”

Remus nods, running a hand over his flushed face. “You know how she is. Something bad happens and she just sort of—decides that it didn’t. Him not hanging around was ruining the illusion for her, so she kept asking until I gave her a lie that would make her feel better.”

James can feel his eyes widen. “Jesus,” he hisses.

“Yup.”

“I didn’t realize she was so invested in your friendship.”

Remus grimaces. “She isn’t really, it’s—it’s not about him. It’s about me. She—“ Remus struggles for a moment, dropping his book onto the ground beside him and leaning forward, arms balanced on his knees. “She’s worried that I’m going to end up alone, just, in general, in life,” he laughs dryly, kicking at the ground, “Werewolves don’t have friends. Lonely, pitiful creatures,” he goes on bitterly, and James feels his blood run cold, realizing that Remus is repeating things his parents have actually said to him.

“My dad’s told her that my life is doomed to be pretty fucking miserable,” he goes on, shooting James a wry look. “She’s worried that this thing with Sirius is the start of that.”

“The start of what?” James demands, trying to sort through the various levels of anger currently boiling under his skin.

“Me losing friends because of my...condition.”

“Bullshit.”

Remus just shrugs, falling back against the tree again. “Makes her feel better, thinking he’s just busy.”

James stares at him for a moment, before reaching forward and jabbing him in the side with his finger.

“Ow, James, what the hell?”

“Stop it.”

Remus’s eyes narrow. “Stop what?”

James gestures to him with his hand. “Being so melancholic. We’re not going anywhere.”

“Yeah okay, still don’t see why the violence was necessary.”

“Remus,” James repeats. “I mean it. You’re not going to be alone. Not ever. And you’re about the least pitiful person I know, so that’s out too.”

They’re staring at one another, and James sees the small crack in Remus’s sarcastic exterior.

“Least pitiful person, huh?”

James nods. “Definitely. Marlene’s a close second though.”

He snorts, pausing for a minute before taking a deep breath. “Thanks,” he says, and James tries to pretend he doesn’t hear the shake in his voice.

He nods, collapsing onto his back again, looking up at the tree branches above them. “Your family’s pretty fucked up, huh?”

That gets a proper big laugh out of Remus, the noise swallowed by the never ending fields surrounding them. “Yeah, yeah a bit.”

In the ensuing silence James can hear the sound of the breeze blowing through the tall grass, but doesn’t feel any of it on his skin, his body slowly overheating. He was not made for the heat. Or for Muggle public transportation.

“How is he?” Remus asks eventually, sounding resigned.

James cringes, in no doubt about who “he” is. “Miserable.”

Remus snorts. “I feel like that’s supposed to make me feel better but it doesn’t.”

“Yeah,” James nods, even though he’s not sure that Remus can see, “tell me about it.”

Another brief pause.

“Look, James, if you want to forgive him—“

“Not a chance,” and then, turning his head to look up at his friend. “Unless you want to...?”

Remus sighs, closing his eyes. “Want to? Absolutely. Can I? Fuck, I don’t know.”

And oh, does James ever feel that right down in the pit of his stomach. He misses Sirius, desperately, almost more so now that their home, without anything else to distract him. Since he was eleven all he’s wanted is for Sirius to live with him, and now he does and they’re not even speaking.

“We’ll figure it out,” he says eventually, which seems to be all he says these days. They’ve pulled off elaborate pranks, figured out how to make a map that tracks everyone in the castle, turned themselves into animagi. Surely they can work their way through this too?

He can feel Remus looking at him. He does that a lot these days, like he’s trying to figure James out. Like something is bothering him. James keeps waiting for Remus to bring it up but he never does. Which James supposes shouldn’t be a surprise.

He exhales. “Moony?”

“Yeah?”

“You’re staring.”

“Am not.”

James rolls his eyes, propping himself up on his elbows again. “You were.”

Remus looks at him and then away, gaze running over the field in front of them, James can’t tell if the flush on the tops of his cheeks is from the sun or from being caught.

“Something you wanna ask me?”

Remus lets out a dry laugh. “Nothing you want to answer.”

That catches James’s interest. “Try me.”

He watches Remus chew his bottom lip, hands fidgeting in his lap as he keeps looking out at the field instead of back at James.

“Sirius told me you’re seeing a bloke,” he says finally. Bluntly. So bluntly, in fact, that it takes James a minute or two to catch up.

“I—he,” he shakes his head, sitting up properly and staring at his friend who still isn’t looking at him. “When did you talk to Sirius?”

Remus looks down. “I don’t know, few weeks after it happened.”

“It?”

He rolls his eyes. “You know what I mean.”

“I didn’t know you were talking to him.”

“I wasn’t—I’m not,” Remus has started pulling up the grass beside him. Nervous habit.

“Well clearly you are,” James isn’t entirely sure why he’s so peeved by this, maybe just because it feels like a secret, something that’s been kept from him on purpose. Or maybe it’s because he’s so desperate to talk to Sirius himself.

Remus sighs, scrubbing at his face with his hands. “It was only once okay? Is that really what’s important here?”

James just stares at him for a minute, t-shirt two sizes too big, ratty jean cut-offs he definitely made himself. Remus Lupin in his natural habitat. The unhappiness is oozing out of him.

“Fine,” James says eventually, running a hand through his hair. “Fine, okay, so he told you. I reckon you don’t have a problem with it?”

Another dry laugh. “No, I don’t have a problem with it,” but it’s clear there’s more, James can feel it, feel the weight of it hanging in the silence between them. Finally, Remus looks back at him. “Is it Regulus Black?”

He wishes he was better at controlling his face. Wishes he couldn’t feel his eyes widen or his mouth drop open. He is eventually able to school his features into something resembling neutral but by then it’s too late. Remus has seen.

“Jesus fuck James,” Remus hangs his head between his knees like he’s going to be sick and James thinks he might join him. Despite being in the middle of a field James suddenly feels claustrophobic—trapped.

“How do you know—did Sirius—“

Remus laughs, though the noise isn’t quite pleasant. “You think if Sirius knew either of you would still be breathing?”

James flinches. Not that he didn’t know that already but it feels worse having someone else say it out loud.

“I saw you, on the map, saw you together in the middle of the night,” Remus goes on, sounding weary. “Put two and two together, though Merlin I really wanted to be wrong.”

James swallows, throat tight, he’s not sure what to say. How to explain—what to explain. It’s all a bit of a mess really. Apparently Remus feels similarly because for too long they stay frozen, neither of them looking, or speaking, or moving. The heat is getting too much for James.

“How long?” Remus asks eventually.

“Last fall.”

“Fuck,” Remus hisses. “What the fuck James? What are you doing? What are you thinking? After everything—after what they did to Sirius—”

“That wasn’t Regulus,” James snaps, anger flaring in his chest, which is better than whatever sad ache he’d been feeling before, so he’ll take it, “he’s trapped there just like Sirius was.”

“No he isn’t, you know he isn’t. Sirius has been trying to get out of that house since he was eleven bloody years old. I mean, he got sorted into Gryffindor for Merlin’s sake. From where I’m sitting Regulus looks pretty fucking comfortable.”

“You have no idea what you’re talking about,” James can hear himself getting louder, and is suddenly very grateful to be out in the middle of nowhere, away from everyone. “He’s fucking terrified. Did you know that Walburga uses Legilimency on them?” and judging by the look of horror that flashes across Remus’s face James is going to assume he didn’t. “They’re all in his head, fucking him up, making him burry himself. So don’t sit there and act like it’s just as easy as walking away, because it isn’t.”

There’s something new in Remus’s gaze now—something softer. Pity, James thinks. It doesn’t make him feel much better.

“But is he trying?” Remus asks softly.

“What?” something scratches at the inside of his chest.

“I—Jesus James, I get it, okay? I was there too, yeah? All those times Sirius showed back up to school looking like he’d had the fucking life beaten out of him. I know it’s not easy. None of this is easy. But Sirius has always tried. Regulus walks around like he’s one of them. He takes the protection it gives him. The privilege,” Remus pinches the bridge of his nose while James just stares at him, the scratching in his chest growing violent.

“Maybe he doesn’t agree with what his friends are doing, I don’t know. But he isn’t stopping them. Didn’t stop them from hurting his brother. I—is that okay with you? Can you get past that? Because to be honest James, I’m having a bloody hard time understanding how.”

James wants to scream, an unbearable pressure building behind his lungs. He shakes his head, closing his eyes, trying to get his thoughts in order. He can see Regulus in the supply room, eyes wide and earnest.

You’re my person.

You’re mine.

“Where is he supposed to go Remus?” he asks finally, barely able to get the words out. “Sirius had us. Regulus has no one.”

When Remus doesn't speak James forces himself to open his eyes again, finding his friend's gaze focused on him.

"He has you now, doesn't he?"

James nods. "In the dark. In secret. Doesn't exactly inspire confidence, does it?"

Remus takes that in, leaning his head back against the tree again and looking up at the branches above. "That your idea or his?"

"I don't know," James answers, not sure if it's a lie or not. Then, after a few seconds, he sighs, "He's more scared than I am."

"Makes sense, don't expect his lot will be particularly accepting."

"No," James says flatly. "I need time, to make him see—make him understand that I'm not going anywhere. That he can trust me," he takes in a shaky breath, trying to ignore the sting that confession causes. Because he can see it, in Regulus's hesitancy, in the way that he still pulls away, that there is a part of him that doesn't trust that James will be there when he needs him.

"I'm going to get him out of there, Remus," he says.

Remus looks back over at him, expression unreadable, "If anyone could it'd be you," he says quietly, almost more to himself than to James. And then, louder; "Just—" he bites his lower lip, the pity making a reappearance, "don't wear yourself out trying to save someone who doesn't want to be saved, okay?"

He breathes through the ache that causes. "He wants to be Moons, really," James hopes that that's true. He's almost certain it is. Almost.

His friend only nods. "You planning on telling Padfoot about this at some point?"

James lets out a huff, collapsing onto his back again. "Before? Maybe. Now? No. Lets just—one problem at a time, yeah?"

"Yeah," Remus answers distantly, and James tries to ignore the skepticism in his voice.

It's nearly dinner by the time James gets home. He missed the bus, and the next one took ages. How Muggles get anywhere on time he has no idea. Right now he just wants to go upstairs and lie down. Maybe take a shower. He's covered in sweat and dirt from sitting on the ground all afternoon.

"James, hun, that you?" his Mother calls from his father's office.

James groans internally, heading grumpily down the hall. "Yeah, you need something?" he asks as he swings into the room, not moving far beyond the door.

His mother snorts. “Hello to you too.”

“Sorry, I’m just tired.”

She’s sitting at his father’s desk—a giant, wooden monstrosity, that reminds James far too much of Dumbledore’s office.

“How’s Remus?” his mother asks pleasantly.

“Fine.”

“Good, I haven’t seen him much recently.”

Jeez, what is it with mother’s and not being able to take a hint?

“I wonder why that is,” he responds flatly.

“You can be angry without being snotty you know,” she says, eyebrow arched.

James sighs, running a hand through his sweaty hair. “Thanks for the tip. Did you call me in here just to lecture me about my attitude or is there something else you want?”

“Wow, you really are in a mood aren’t you?”

“I hate the bus.”

That gets a laugh out of her, big and bright, enough that it pulls the corners of James’s mouth up.

“Fair enough I suppose,” and then she pushes something forward across the desk.

James squints at it, stepping closer. “What is it?”

“A letter,” she says simply. “It’s address to you, it came by Muggle post.”

“What?” he scrunches his face, looking back at her.

“Yes,” she smiles, “I was rather surprised too—so was the mailman, now that I think about it.”

“Mailman?”

She waves his question away. “Muggle owl.”

“Instead of owls Muggles use men? That sounds bloody inefficient. Almost as inefficient as their stupid buses that only come once a stupid hour.”

“James,” she says, biting back a smile, “focus.”

“Oh—right,” he picks up the white envelope, with its funny little picture in the corner, and neat handwriting spelling out his name and address. “Who’s it from?”

“I don’t know, there’s no return address.”

“Return—what?”

His mother laughs again. “Never mind. I had to run some spells on it, make sure it was safe. Technically I’m supposed to give anything odd to Moody to check out but…” something twinkles in the corner of her eyes that James doesn’t quite understand. A joke he’s missed. “I feel confident it’s safe.”

“Er—okay, cheers,” he starts to open it and his mother quickly gets up.

“I’ll leave you to it shall I?” she says lightly, planting a kiss on the top of his head as she breezes past.

“Don’t you want to know who it’s from?” he asks, confused as he watches his mother head for the door.

“Oh I have my suspicions, though feel free to confirm them for me later if you like.”

“Wait mum—“ she pauses, turning back to him. “Is Sirius here?”

She shakes her head. “Gone into town, to the shops. That’s what he said anyway,” she smiles sadly. “That’s what he does most days.”

James nods, suddenly not sure why he asked, he’s just…used to knowing. “Thanks.”

She gives him one last smile before closing the door, leaving James alone in his father’s office, arguably his least favourite room in the house. He’s only ever called in here when he’s in trouble. It’s a dark space, wooden floors and walls, never ending bookcases, an overly ornate fireplace. All rather suffocating if you ask James.

Slowly, his attention drags back to the letter in his hands and he drops into the chair his mother just left, sliding his finger under the seal and pulling out the pages inside.

Hi.

James pauses, squinting at the word, the curving script, recognition slowly dawning on him.

Don’t ask me what I’m thinking,

The letter goes on.

I’ve spent too much time with you, clearly, all my common sense has gone out the window.

“Oh,” the word comes out of James on his next exhale, chest aching as he hears the words so clearly in Regulus’s voice. He hadn’t been ready for this.

I can’t send you post via owl but I thought—well—it’s not as though my mother is checking the Muggle mail. I don’t think so anyway. I suppose we’ll find out. I’m not even sure this will get to you. Bertha, she works at the postoffice here, tried to explain to me how it all works—

Muggle mail, I mean—sounds like a dreadful system if you ask me, but she double checked that I addressed this correctly so maybe there's a chance it'll make it to you anyway. I hope it makes it to you.

I'm in Scotland, at the summer house. It's good to get out of the city, and I can fly here which is—which helps. My dad loves it, he grew up in the country and mostly just tolerates London for my mother's sake. He spends most of his days out in the back garden watching me fly. It makes him happy, though I've no idea why. Still, I'll do anything at this point. He's worse than he was at Christmas. The Healers don't expect him to last much longer, but then, they're always saying that.

Sorry, I'm rambling. I'd start over, but I've already done this three times and I have to go home soon. I've been reading your letters. See, this is where I always get stuck. It's the reason for the rambling at the top. Because I've been reading your letters, that's why I'm writing this ridiculous letter and sending it in the ridiculous Muggle post. Because every time I read them I just—I just want to talk to you. I miss talking to you. I miss your voice. I miss the way you laugh. I miss your atrocious hair. I miss. I miss. I miss. That's all I do these days.

Well, that and go to the gallery. I've visited Patroclus and Achilles a few times, told them you say hi. God, sorry, that was awful, I don't know what I'm saying. Look, all I meant to say really, is that the letters are beautiful. Your letters are beautiful. And I wish that I could—that I could be what you are, to me. I know I'm not very good at this. But I want to be. For you.

Anyway, this is enough embarrassment for one letter. I don't think I'll try this again. But I hope that you're happy, whatever you're doing, whoever you're with.

Yours, always.

James rereads those last two words a few times. To anyone else it would be a half finished sign-off. But James understands.

You're my person. You're mine.

Okay Reg, yeah, I'm yours. You're mine too.

He traces them with his finger a few times, imagining Regulus sitting in some Muggle postoffice in Scotland penning them out.

Yours.

Yours.

Always.

He takes in a deep breath and fights the urge to find the closest Portkey to Scotland. Not that he'd have any real idea where he was going, Regulus never mentions specifics. His eyes flick across the page again. Once. Twice. Greedy for every word. Every sentence. Every piece of Regulus he can squeeze out of it.

I miss.

I miss.

I miss.

Me too, James thinks, God me too. He tries to remember if he thought to put that in his letters. But he must have. He misses Regulus the minute he walks away.

The next morning, like every morning, James finds himself sitting silently across from his best friend. Both of them working overtime not to look or speak to one another—or indicate that they are, in any way, aware of the other’s existence. Euphemia attempts to engage them in conversation a few times before giving up and going back to her work, parchment spread out in front of her as she ladles marmalade onto her toast. James asks her what the papers are for but she’s cagey with her answers. She always is these days.

When the owls arrive it’s a welcomed break from the tension. Well, until James realizes what they’re delivering.

“Your school lists already?” his mum says, peering over his shoulder.

The letters is pretty standard, all his books and supplies for next term neatly laid out and—

“Oh, James,” his mother beams as he holds up the Quidditch Captain badge. He allows himself a brief look across the table but Sirius is staring with an odd intensity at the parchment in his hands.

“Your father is going to be over the moon,” his mum goes on, getting up to grab a mug for her coffee.

James only nods. It’s bitter sweet really. I mean, it’s what he’s always wanted, but Sirius won’t be there. Or Alice or Frank. The loss of them makes it all a bit more...hollow. He passes the badge through his fingers a few times before turning back to the letter. Realizing, suddenly, that there’s another page hidden behind the first.

Dear Mr. Potter,

It reads.

As you are aware, Frank Longbottom graduated last year, leaving your dorm with an empty bed and Sirius Black without a room. It would be possible to place him in another room but that would require you to accept a new roommate. Since you were the one who first suggested his removal, and since some time has passed since the inciting incident, I thought it prudent to verify that it is still your wish not to room with Sirius Black.

Please discuss this with Mr. Lupin and respond to me quickly with your decision.

Sincerely,

Minerva McGonagall

He forgot about this. About what it means that Frank is gone. He had always been a temporary fix, a stall, putting off the inevitable of having to deal with Sirius. James scans the letter a few more times but doesn't come up with any solutions. Part of him never wants to share a room with Sirius again. The other part is desperate to have things go back to the way they were.

Of course, it isn't about him. It'll all come down to what Remus wants. Maybe he'll go back there later today and—

"I don't understand," Sirius's voice cuts through the kitchen with such urgency that James forgets he's supposed to be ignoring him, looking up just as his mother reaches Sirius's side.

"What is it love?" she asks, he passes her the parchment in his hands, wide-eyed and pale. It's only then that James realizes that Sirius's Hogwarts letter is still lying unopened on the table.

"I don't understand why—that can't be right, I must be—because why would he do that?" his voice is small and shaking and James has the irritating urge to reach out and squeeze his arm. He doesn't, of course, he just keeps staring, eyes bouncing between Sirius's face and his mother's.

"Oh Sirius," his mother says softly, eyes flicking over the page in front of her, hand falling on his shoulder.

"It's a mistake right? They've made a mistake?"

His mother chews her bottom lip. "No, I don't think so. It all seems to be rather legitimate."

It's hard for James to work out what emotion is playing across Sirius's face—pain, disbelief, awe—he can't take it. He breaks.

"What's going on?" he asks, bringing both of the heads across from him snapping in his direction.

"His Uncle Alphard," Euphemia says softly, "he seems to have changed his will not long before he died and left everything to Sirius."

James's eyes go wide. "Everything?"

Sirius sinks down in his chair, face pale. "I don't know why he did that, I don't—I barely knew him." His voice is thick and he coughs like he can get the feelings out of it.

James watches his mother squeeze Sirius's shoulder again, thumb making comforting circles. "Clearly you were very important to him."

Sirius's breath hitches, eyes somewhere on the floor, not looking at either of them. James remembers the look on his face, the first time he mentioned his uncle, remembers the care he always took with the letters he sent him. Sirius may have barely known Alphard, but knowing him at all had meant a lot to him. Sirius could be glib about his family, but however

awful they were, walking away from them had still cost Sirius something. Not because he missed Grimmauld Place or Walburga, but because he missed belonging. However much the Potter's embraced him, he would always be a Black. An extra piece.

"We should go into town today, sort this out," his mother breaks the silence that's crept up around them. "The lawyer's office is in Diagon Alley so that's easy." She leans down and kisses the top of Sirius's head. "I'll go get ready and we can leave in an hour, okay?"

Sirius nods quietly, Euphemia giving him one last squeeze before moving quickly out of the room, spelling her papers to follow behind her. The two boys remain frozen in their seats—Sirius unable to look at James and James unable to look away from Sirius. He has no idea what's in that will but he reckons it's probably a good amount of money, Alphard was a Black after all. He wonders if he had a wife and children, but he mustn't have, not if he's left everything to Sirius. James realizes, suddenly, how very little he knows about Alphard Black, guilt worming its way into his gut. He should have asked Sirius more about him.

Eventually, Sirius gets up, not looking at James until he reaches the kitchen door. "Will—" he croaks, voice startling James, who turns to face him, "will you come with us?"

He hesitates, feeling entirely unprepared for all of this.

Sirius quickly shakes his head. "Sorry, that was stupid, never mind."

"Sirius," he calls to him before he can get too far down the hall. The other boy turns back and James wonders if this is the first time they've spoken since the night it all happened. It feels like it. "I'll come," he exhales, "of course I'll come."

Too many emotions flash across Sirius's face for James to makes sense of them. But when he speaks, it sounds like the first breath after a deep dive.

"Thank you."

The lawyer's office is in a worryingly thin building, squeezed between a botany shop and a Chinese food restaurant. It's possible that at one point it was an actual colour, but it's covered in so much soot and dirt that it's now just a murky grey.

They're all sitting in front of a tall, spindly wizard, his hair is orange and curly, streaked at the temples with grey, his robes starch straight and black. He has a very thin face, high cheek bones, and big, watering eyes. Like he's in a constant state of distress. It makes it very hard for James to take him seriously. Sirius is sat next to him, his mum on Sirius's other side. He has his head down, hands fiddling in his lap, and James is reminded unkindly of that day in Dumbledore's office.

"Can I just say again, Mrs. Potter," the lawyer—Mr. Beagle—says for the hundredth time, as he scrounges through the papers on his desk, "what an absolute honour it is to have you here—to be able to serve you—an indescribable honour."

His mother smiles kindly. “Thank you, but you really don’t need to fuss.”

To be honest, James isn’t sure this man has ever done anything but fuss.

“Ah—ha!” He pulls out a scroll, slowly unfurling it between his hands. “The last Will and Testament of Alphard Black,” he announces proudly, peering over at them as though expecting some kind of reaction—applause. When he doesn’t get any he turns back to the parchment. “There are several logistical elements that I expect you’re not interested in but... ah, here we are,” he clears his throat. “To my Nephew, Sirius Black III, I leave the entirety of my estate, including my home in Cornwall, my flat in Diagon Alley, and the contents of my account at Gringotts, totalling three-hundred-thousand Galleons, seven-hundred Sickles and fifty Knuts. Included in this is my art collection, encompassing—”

Sirius seems to sink further into his chair with every word the lawyer says. Unable to help himself, James shifts closer, knocking their shoulders together, leaning on Sirius just long enough for him to know that it was intentional. The other boy looks up for the first time, their eyes meeting. James doesn’t need him to speak to know what he’s thinking.

I killed him.

I killed him and now I’m getting all his stuff.

The lawyer continues to list the numerous priceless artefacts also being left to Sirius, his voice droning on. Eventually Sirius’s eyes break with James and return to the man in front of them.

“Excuse me,” he cuts in, interrupting a description of gold plated tableware. The lawyer looks up, startled.

“Yes, sir?”

“You’re sure he meant to do this?” Sirius asks, looking at him a little desperately. “That he wasn’t—I don’t know—drunk or held at wand-point or something?”

“Certainly not,” the man seems affronted that such a question would even be asked. “I was here when the will was drawn-up, I witnessed it with my own eyes. Mr. Black was of sound mind, everything above board,” his eyes shift nervously over to James’s mother.

“I’m sure it was,” she says softly, putting him at ease.

“I just don’t understand why he did it,” Sirius is talking to Euphemia now. “I never gave him anything.”

She smiles sadly, reaching out to brush the hair off his forehead. “Maybe you did, and you just didn’t realize it. You are quite remarkable Sirius.”

He flinches at that, and James knows that he’s partly responsible for Sirius’s astronomically high levels of self-hatred at the moment. After a brief pause Euphemia looks back at the Lawyer. “I think we’re ready to continue.”

“Oh—yes, yes—Of course.”

In the end all they need is to confirm Sirius’s magical signature in order to authenticate the will. The tap of a wand and he’s suddenly rich all on his own. No need for his mother or his inheritance. You would think he’d find some of that comforting, but he stays tense and sober the whole time, even when they make it back out onto the street.

“Well,” his mother says, squinting through the sun, “since we’re already here, shall we check it out?”

“Check what out?” James asks.

She looks over at him, hand shielding her eyes. “The flat.” Her gaze skips from James to Sirius, cocking her brow in question.

It takes him a minute, but eventually he nods. “Yeah,” he says, ruffling his hair. “Yeah okay.”

They don’t talk as they maneuver through the busy streets, Sirius with his head down and his hands in his pockets, James awkwardly at his side, following the back of his mother’s head. He knows he should say something, that he probably would have already, if things were different. But, given that they’re still fighting—because they are, aren’t they?—he’s not really sure what the right course of action is here.

“This is it,” Euphemia stops in front of a blue door with a bronze knocker, pulling a key from the envelope the Lawyer gave them and holding it out to Sirius. “Yours I believe.”

He takes it hesitantly, fumbling as he fits it into the lock. The door opens into a small foyer with a set of stairs leading up. James thinks he hears Sirius gulp as they push inside.

The apartment is...nice. Warmer than James was expecting. He always pictures the Blacks living in recreations of the Slytherin common room, but this space isn’t that. It’s got worn wood floors and butter yellow walls, a big bay window in the living room, with a rug and sofa covered in blankets and pillows. None of the expensive art pieces Mr. Beagle had mentioned are hung up here, instead the walls are covered in concert posters—some looking like they were literally torn off of walls and lampposts. None of them are magic, as far as James can tell.

There’s one bedroom, the sheets still messed up, a small kitchen with a mug in the sink, shoes carelessly removed by the door. All the signs of someone meaning to return. James half-expects him to walk through the door.

“Well,” his mum says, once they all find themselves back in the living room. She stands by the front door, Sirius across the room, leaning against the entrance to the kitchen, “this is lovely. We should find a time next week, go through everything, figure out what you want to keep. I’ll tell Mimi to pop by every once and a while to make sure it’s kept in good shape for you until you decide you want to use it—if you want to, that is,” she corrects herself. “You could always sell it or rent it out of course, it is a rather fabulous location.”

Sirius has a look on his face, like he's got something stuck in his throat. He nods along, fingers nervously playing with his lower lip.

"Actually," he says eventually, "I was thinking I might...move here."

There's a pause.

"You mean now?" Euphemia asks, causing something cold to run down James's spine.

Sirius nods, very purposefully not making eye contact with anyone.

"You're still a minor Sirius..."

"I know, but you're my guardian right?"

"I am."

"So you could—could give me permission, to be on my own?"

James is waiting for his mother to laugh. To tell Sirius what a ridiculous suggestion that is and of course he can't move in here. But that isn't what happens.

"I'd have to talk to Fleamont, but if you really want to—"

"Are you joking?" James can't take it anymore. "He can't move out," he turns to Sirius. "You can't move out."

Sirius glares back at him defiantly, it's the most like himself he's looked all summer. "Why not?"

"Why not?" James demands. "Because you're a kid—you don't even know how to make bloody toast. How the hell are you going to live on your own?"

"First of all, I'm not a kid you prat, and I can totally make toast," he says defensively. "Why the hell do you care anyway? Isn't this what you want?"

"For you to starve to death? Not really, no."

Sirius throws his arms up in frustration. "I can manage feeding myself James, Jesus Christ."

"You can't move in here," he doubles down, teeth clenched.

"Yes, I can."

"No, you can't."

"Yes. I. Can."

James turns back to his mother, jabbing an indignant finger in Sirius's direction. "Are you really going to let him do this?"

“I do remember saying something about needing to talk about it,” she sounds far too casual for James’s liking.

“You don’t get to decide what I do Prongs.”

“I do when you’re being an idiot.”

Sirius scowls. “I’m not being an idiot,” and then, with a frustrated huff. “I don’t get you. You kick me out of our dorm, you don’t speak to me for weeks, and now suddenly you’re desperate to have me living in your house? What do you want from me?”

“I want you to have not fucking told Snape!” he snaps, the words ripping out of him like they hurt. Because they do.

Sirius looks like he’s just been hit, anger fleeing his face and that familiar lost look back in place. The one that’s been a permanent fixture all summer.

“I’m going to wait for you two at the bottom of the stairs,” Euphemia says quietly, neither of them turning to watch as she slips out of the room.

“I want you to have not done it,” James repeats, voice gravel. “You think this has been fucking fun for any of us? You think I want to be mad at you? I hate it,” his voice cracks but he pushes on, Sirius watching him with wide eyes. “But I don’t know what else to do. I don’t know how to forgive you Sirius.”

And now he’s begging, really. Begging Sirius to tell him how. How do we get past this? How do we go back? I don’t want to be broken anymore.

“I’m sorry,” Sirius says. It’s all he ever seems to say these days.

James sighs, bringing his hands up to his face and turning away, towards the window.

“But I did it,” Sirius goes on, talking to James’s back. “I wish I hadn’t—get me a time-turner, I’ll go back. I’ll change everything.”

James shakes his head. “I want you to have not done it,” he repeats. “I want you to be incapable of doing it.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I thought we were on the same page—I thought we were going to protect each other no matter what, have each others’ backs no matter what,” God it sounds so stupid now that he says it out loud. So childish.

“We are—James, I swear I never meant to hurt him. I would never hurt him. I wasn’t—I wasn’t thinking. I didn’t—I was just—my head was all fucked up and I saw Snape and his stupid sneering face and I just—I acted. I didn’t think. You know me, I never think.” Sirius sounds breathless, the room filled with ghosts. With what if’s and maybe’s and should have’s. All of it stings. Their friendship an open wound.

Eventually James turns back around to face him. Sirius has stepped forward, face pale, hair mussed from running his hands through it. James knows he means it. Means all of it. Knows that he's sorry. When you're younger it all feels so much simpler. Someone apologizes and you accept. It's supposed to be enough. But it doesn't feel like enough anymore.

"But you were supposed to think about us," he says eventually, watching Sirius flinch.

"That's the thing," he croaks, voice splintering on its way out of his mouth, "I do. All the time. You guys are all I think about. What I'm going to tell you, what would make you laugh, where you are, what you're doing, if you wish I was there like I wish I was there. I do think about you," he's as close to sobbing as James has ever seen someone who isn't already crying. "It was one time—the one time I wasn't thinking about you and I—" dry and cracked and desperate. "I'm so fucking scared. So scared of what I did. That all it took was one moment and I hurt the most important people in my life. And the worst part, is I didn't even feel it. I—"

He squeezes his eyes shut, trying to pull his words together. "I knew that you were upset, that Peter was upset, that it wasn't funny. But I couldn't feel the wrongness of it. Not until I saw you crawling out of the tree, covered in blood, and then it was like—something in me cracked open and all the sudden it was all there."

There is a desperate look in his eyes when he opens them again. "I don't know what's wrong with me," he whispers.

James is moving before he can think about it, pulling Sirius into his arms as he falls apart. It hurts. But then, James is used to that at this point, so he just holds Sirius tighter. He wonders how this is allowed to happen, how anyone ever let Sirius stay in that house so long, how they let Regulus stay there still. How can he be the only one who sees them?

"Fuck," Sirius huffs, pulling away and wiping his face on the inside of his shirt. James is reluctant to let him go.

"Don't move out," he says, a confidence in his voice that he doesn't feel about anything right now.

Sirius looks tired. "I can't stay there like this James, I can't handle us acting like we don't know each other. Like we hate each other. It's fucking killing me."

"Me too," James agrees, doing his best to keep his voice under control. For the first time in a long time Sirius looks hopeful.

"Yeah?"

James nods. "I don't hate you Sirius, I never have."

Sirius lets out a wet laugh. "Thank fuck for that."

James smiles back, even if it is a little shaky.

“Don’t move out,” he repeats. “I’m not saying everything is fixed but—I don’t want you to go. Can that be enough?”

Sirius snuffles, wiping his nose on his sleeve. “Yeah,” he says eventually. “That can be enough.”

James sends Remus an owl as soon as they get home. Brief. To the point.

Moons,

Can we talk tonight?

Fireplace? Midnight?”

James

He doesn’t want Sirius there for this. The two of them are—they’re better. But they’re fragile. They make awkward small talk on the way home. Not really able to look at one another but trying not to look away. It’ll be easier, James thinks, after he talks to Remus. It’ll feel less like a betrayal.

He waits by the fireplace in his father’s office, door closed, mum and Sirius up in their bedrooms, McGonagall’s letter clutched in his hand. The flames flicker a few times before Remus’s face emerges.

“Hey,” he says lamely.

“Hey,” Remus returns, “everything okay? Your letter seemed kind of...urgent.”

“Oh, yeah, yeah, everything’s okay,” he tries to swallow but his throat is too tight. “Listen, um, I got—er—I got my Hogwarts letter today.”

Remus gives him a funny look. “Yup, I figured. They usually send those out at the same time,” he laughs a little. “What’s up with you James? You’re acting like I’m Lily or something.”

That brings a smirk to James’s face. “You think I’m trying to seduce you Lupin?”

Remus arches his brow, impressively sassy even in the fireplace. “Are you?”

“Always.”

They both laugh at that, breaking the tension. James can do this. He can. He just doesn’t know how to start.

“James?” Remus pushes.

“Right, sorry, so, I got another letter, with my—ah—with my school list.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah,” he nods, feeling the parchment in his hand like a hot coal. “Yeah, it’s from McGonagall, she wants to know if—if we want to room with Sirius again or if she should find us a new roommate.”

He sees the surprise on Remus’s face, and then sees him try to suppress it almost immediately.

“Oh,” he says.

“Yeah that was—that was how I felt too. Bit of a—“

“Gut punch.”

“Yeah.”

They’re both nodding at each other, neither of them sure where this goes next. James doesn’t want to tell him about the conversation he had with Sirius, not yet anyway. Doesn’t want him to feel pressured into anything because he thinks it’s what James wants.

“What’re you going to tell her?” Remus asks finally, and James almost laughs.

“Whatever you tell me to.”

“James—“

But he shakes his head, cutting Remus off. “You were fucked over here Remus. The rest of us were just—collateral damage. You decide what you need, what makes you feel comfortable. Whatever you want I’ll support it.”

He can see Remus biting his lower lip, the nervous energy wafting off the fire like smoke.

“God, it shouldn’t be this hard,” Remus mutters, and then laughs at himself, it’s a heavy sound. “Fuck it, okay.”

“Okay?” James asks.

Remus swipes a hand across his face. “Tell her it’s okay, I’m not rooming with a stranger that’s ridiculous. The amount I’d have to hide every full moon? It was hard enough with Frank and we liked him,” he shakes his head. “We’ll deal with Sirius—I don’t know how, but we will. Besides, it would feel wrong, having anyone else in there. Don’t you think?”

James nods, trying to contain his relief. “Yeah, yeah I do.”

“For good or bad, he already knows all my secrets,” Remus sighs.

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah—or, no, not really,” he gives James a sad smile, “but I’m not really sure about anything these days.”

“I know the feeling,” James feels his grip loosen on the letter in his hand. “Okay, well, I’ll write her tonight.”

Remus nods. “I should go, my mum won’t sleep until she knows I’m in my room.”

“Right, okay. I’ll come ‘round tomorrow yeah?”

“Sounds good, I think Pete’s planning to come by too.”

“Brilliant—Moony?” he says.

“Yeah?”

James takes a deep breath. “I have your back, always, you know that right?”

Something flickers in his eyes, but James isn’t sure if it’s really there or if it’s just the fire.

“Yeah James, I know. Me too—I have your back. I know I was a little...harsh, yesterday. But I—I’m here, if you need anything. Okay?”

James nods, smiling. “G’night Moons.”

“Night James.”

The fireplace splutters, flames reaching out for a second and then receding back as the connection is severed. James sits back on his heels, trying to let go of some of the anxiety still clinging to his skin. It’s okay, everything went okay. Remus said yes. Sirius can come back. Nothing is fixed, of course, not completely, but...at least it’s a start. They’re mending.

He gets up, rounding his father’s desk and pulling out a fresh piece of parchment. He scribbles McGonagall a note, nothing fancy, but he wants to get this done now. When it’s sealed and addressed he goes into the back garden and whistles for Hoot. He comes almost instantly, happy to have a job—James hasn’t had much for him to do this summer.

“That a boy,” he says softly, tying the letter to his leg and ending him off. He’s almost instantly lost in the black night sky.

“Okay,” James whispers to himself, hand running through his hair. “Okay, okay,” it’s rubbish, trying to comfort yourself. Never works. Still, he tries to get himself to relax. Today was a good day. Hard and long and bloody exhausting. But good.

He’s only just come back inside when he hears the crack of someone apparating into the front hallway.

“Bloody hell,” they curse as he walks through the kitchen towards them. He knows it’s his dad, there’s no one else who’s keyed into their wards—well, except for Dumbledore and Moody. But that ‘bloody hell’ was definitely his dad.

“You’re back late—“ James stops at the top the hall, his father looking up at the sound of his voice, face bloodied. “D-dad?”

Fleamont tries to smile and then winces. “Bad huh? Haven’t had the chance to look in a mirror yet.”

And then he starts limping towards his office, as though showing up in the middle of the night beaten to a fucking pulp is nothing out of the ordinary.

“What the hell happened? Are you okay?” he follows him into the office, watching as he throws his cloak on his desk, the shirt underneath dirty and blood splattered.

“Shh,” he says, opening the closet door and peering into the mirror hung-up on the inside. “I don’t want to wake your mother.” He pulls out his wand and starts casting healing charms. James watches as the skin on his face starts stitching itself back together, bruises fading.

“Dad,” he repeats, still standing in the doorway, “what happened?” He can see that his dad is okay, he’s standing right in front of him, so he doesn’t know why he suddenly feels so afraid.

“Well,” his father sighs, eyeing his face one more time before deciding it’s good enough. He pulls away from he mirror and leans against the front of his desk, facing James. “I encountered a bit of a...situation, trying to leave work.”

“I can see that,” James says, fighting between concerned and annoyed now.

Fleamont offers him another small smile. They’re really the only kind he has, everything he expresses is tinged with a bit of self-conscious embarrassment, nothing like the boisterous emotions of James’s mum.

“There have been attacks,” his father sighs, sagging a little bit. Now that the blood is gone James can clearly see the deep bags under his father’s eyes, lines marking up his forehead and mouth in a way they never have before. For the first time in his life, James finds himself thinking that his father looks old. “Three in the last two weeks.”

“Three?” James demands, because he’s been reading the paper everyday and he hasn’t seen a single bleeding thing about attacks.

Fleamont nods. “All Ministry employees, usually leaving or coming to work. Moody thinks it’s a new kind of initiation.”

“Initiation for what?”

His father sends him a look.

Oh.

OH.

“Death Eaters are attacking the Ministry now?”

His father does not seem nearly as concerned as James thinks he should be. "It's only a theory, no one's died yet, they don't seem to be very well organized. That's what makes us think they're not proper members."

James isn't sure if that's supposed to be comforting, but it isn't. "Why don't they have extra security then?"

A rueful smile finds its way onto Fleamont's face. "There's some, but the Minister doesn't want to allow Moody to post too many, afraid if people start seeing hoards of Aurors marching around they'll get the wrong idea."

"Which is?"

"That we're in trouble."

James feels something squirm in the pit of his stomach. "Are we?" he asks, voice tight, "In trouble?"

The good humour slowly drops from his father's face. "Yes."

"Oh," which James realizes is a stupid and inadequate response, but it's the only one he has.

"I'm not trying to scare you James," his father says softly. "But I don't want to lie to you either."

Feeling slightly dazed James shakes his head. "I'm not scared," an automatic response.

"Well," a sad smile finds its way onto his father's face. "You're a braver man than I am."

James doesn't believe that for a second.

"It's late," his father pushes off the desk. "You should head up to bed before your mother comes down here and gives us both grief."

"You aren't going to bed?" James asks.

His father nods at the fireplace behind him. "I've got to call Dumbledore, let him know what's happened."

"Right, okay," he's hesitant to move but he can't think of any excuse to stay so, reluctantly, he starts making his way towards the door.

"James?" his dad calls to him before he's out of the room. James turns back. "I don't think I've had the chance to tell you, but I'm really proud of how you handled everything this past year at school."

When James's brows inevitably draw together in confusion his father chuckles, explaining; "I know you and the Snape boy aren't exactly on the best of terms. But it was incredibly brave and decent, what you did, going after him. Saving him."

James isn't exactly sure what to say to that.

"I didn't do it for him," he manages eventually. "I did it for Remus."

His father nods, a knowing look on his face. "You're a good friend."

James shrugs. "They're important to me."

"Good," his father says, moving slowly behind his desk. "hold on to that—that feeling—let it keep you together."

There's no wavering in James's voice when he answers; "I intend to."

Chapter End Notes

Hello lovelies!

Oh my God this chapter is the bane of my existence, like, just, cannot get it right. But here we are! Mostly because I'm impatient and want to work on the next one.

I also wish I had a rich uncle who would die and leave me everything in his will but oh well.

THANK YOU for being so nice all the time it is truly so lovely to read your comments! Hope you're all having a good day!

Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

It's Lily-he-has-her-eyes-Evans

Chapter Notes

TW: very very vague reference to suicide or suicidal thoughts

TW: discussion about homophobia

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Lily lies on her bedroom floor, record player on in the background, music drifting over her. It's brutally hot, too hot to move, or think. Her fingers drag lazily through the beige carpet that covers every room in the house except the bathroom and kitchen. Her father always used to talk about tearing it out, but he never got around to it. She's glad that he didn't. It feels like home now—after spending all year surrounded by stone, she comes back to soft floors and warm colours.

“Lily!” a shrill voice cuts through the music.

She doesn't move. Doesn't open her eyes. Maybe if she lies very, very still they won't be able to find her.

Barely two minutes later the door to her room is being thrown open. “Jesus Lily, couldn't you hear me?”

She sighs, cracking one eye open to peer up at the towering figure of her sister, dark hair still in curlers, the mint green nightgown she's had since she was thirteen brushing against her knees.

“No, sorry,” Lily says mildly, not bothering to move. This, predictably, infuriates Petunia.

“You said you would help,” everything with her sister is a lightly veiled guilt-trip.

You said you would help.

You owe me.

Make up for it.

For the magic.

For not being here.

You said you would help.

Lily sighs, pulling herself upright and resting her arms on her knees.

“What d’you need?”

Petunia is really rather pretty—probably the prettier of the two of them—the problem is, she’s always got this pinched look on her face. Sour and unhappy and constantly let down. It makes her unappealing to look at.

“Food for my hen do, nice food though, not just crisps from the grocery store.”

Lily blinks up at her. “Nice food?”

Petunia sighs like Lily is the stupidest person she has ever met. “Cheeses and baguettes and char-cootie boards.”

“Charcuterie?”

“Gazoontite.”

“No it’s—” Lily laughs. “Never mind,” she gets to her feet. “Yeah, okay, I can go get you some posh snacks. When do you need them for?”

“Four.”

Lily’s eyes skate over to the clock on her bedside table. It’s only ten in the morning. What all the yelling was about she’s no idea. As if snacks are going to take more than six hours to get—even posh ones.

“Also, pick us up some Presecco.”

Lily gives her a flat look. “I’m under age.”

Her sister smiles unpleasantly. “And yet you still manage to get those dirty cigarettes you don’t want mum to see.”

Lily rolls her eyes. “Yes, okay, I’ll try. But if they don’t take my fake it’s not my fault.”

Petunia makes a very lofty “hmp” noise. “I’m sure you’ll be fine. If anything goes wrong you can just use your little stick and magic it all away.”

“That’s not how it—”

“Lily!” their mum’s voice echoes from downstairs. “Phone for you!”

“Oh thank God,” she murmurs under her breath.

“Hey, wait—“

But Lily slips passed her, “Sorry, I gotta take this!” she says over her shoulder as she skids around the corner.

“Lily—ugh!”

She practically crashes into her mum who’s leaving the living room at the exact moment that she makes it to the bottom of the stairs. She looks at Lily and then behind her where Petunia can still be heard grumbling—probably cursing Lily’s name.

“I’ll get her snacks, I promise,” Lily says before her mother can start.

Mrs. Evans sighs. “Listen, I know she’s being...” she trails off but sends Lily a look that is clearly meant to say “a crazy bitch” so Lily nods. “But she’s just stressed, Vernon’s sister is coming to the hen do and she wants to impress her.”

“Sure mum, I get it,” Lily doesn’t point out that Petunia is always like this around her. Has been since she was eleven years old.

Her mum smiles a little sadly. “You’re a good girl Lily.”

She tries not to cringe. “Thanks mum, I—uh—I better....” she nods towards the telephone in the living room.

“Oh yeah, of course, go on.”

Lily does. Enthusiastically. Not even bothering to ask who it is, any conversation is better than whatever was happening up in her bedroom.

“Hello?” she sings as she throws herself into the armchair by the phone.

“Jesus, where were you coming from? Alaska? We’ve been waiting on the line for ages.”

Lily smiles at the sound of Mary’s voice. “We?” she asks.

“Oh yeah, Mar’s here, you’re on speaker by the way, so if you have anything nasty to say about her it’ll have to wait until later.”

“Oh my God Mary,” she can practically hear Marlene rolling her eyes over the phone. “Hey Lily, how’s it going? How’s home?”

She grimaces, glad they can’t see. Lily does her best not to let it get to her, and by “it” she very much means her sister. With Petunia it’s easier to pretend it’s all a joke—the glaring and passive aggressive comments. Some ridiculous sketch on a comedy program. Better to laugh than to yell and fight.

“Hello? Earth to Lily?” Mary’s voice crackles over the line.

Lily shakes herself awake. “Hi—sorry—um, home is fine.”

Mary makes a skeptical scoffing noise. “Sister being a nightmare then?”

“Oh, Jesus Mary,” Marlene hisses. “Don’t make me muzzle you.”

“Promises, promises.”

Lily laughs, her free hand coming to her mouth to try and catch it. Laughter is an odd sound in this house, without her father. It’s not that they’re unhappy, not exactly. Or—Lily isn’t. She’s not so sure about her mum and sister.

“It is your sister though isn’t it?” Mary pushes on, never one to demure.

“Yeah,” Lily says.

“Full bridezilla?”

She snorts. “You could certainly say that.”

“Have you got your bridesmaid dress yet?” Marlene asks.

“Yes,” this time much more grudgingly.

“Oh no,” Lily can already hear Mary laughing. “Just how horrible is it?”

“Well, it’s dusty rose—“

“NO!” Lily has to pull the phone away from her ear. “No it isn’t! She wouldn’t! Oh and with your hair? Pink, Lily?”

“Yup,” she says flatly, “with sleeves the size of my head and ruffles as far as the eye can see.” Mary starts making fake retching noises in the background.

Lily’s only a bridesmaid in the first place because their mother made Petunia include her. While Lily appreciates the gesture, she really, really, wishes she hadn’t. It’s been nothing but a misery, and besides, Lily would rather just sit anonymously in the crowd, ignored. Invisible. Or not go at all.

“Anyway,” she says eventually, “how’re you two? I expect you didn’t call just to gag over my sister’s wedding?”

Mary snorts. “No, we most certainly did not. We called to inform you of the party you will be attending on Friday.”

“She means we called to ask you—“

“Asking implies a choice, there’s no choice here.”

“Who’s going to be there?” Lily interrupts their bickering before they can really get on a roll. There’s a pause which means that Marlene and Mary are doing that thing where they talk with their eyes.

“Why,” Mary asks eventually, voice teasing, “who do you want to be there?”

Lily rolls her eyes. “No one.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Okay—Marlene, who is going to be there?”

There’s ruffling and muffled voices until eventually Marlene comes through, crisper and louder than before. Clearer she won the battle for the phone.

“Sorry Lily—erm—the whole Quidditch team—“

“Ooh Alice and Frank too? I haven’t seen them in ages!”

“I know right?” Marlene agrees. “Auror training is a bitch, but yeah, they said they’d be there. Dorcas too, Lucy and Tanner from herbology, uh, that prat Diggory because Mary has decided she wants to shag him.”

Lily wrinkles her nose. “Ew, Diggory? Why?”

“Tell me about it, but she said something about his—“

“OKAY!” Mary interrupts. “Why don’t you just cut to the chase and tell her about the people she really cares about huh?”

“There aren’t people I really care about!” Lily insists, though she has a feeling it’s a losing battle.

Marlene sighs. “James, Remus and Peter are coming too.”

There may be, possibly, potentially, in a theoretical situation that one could think up, a small skip in her pulse. But Lily doesn’t let herself consider it. And she certainly doesn’t intend to admit it to Mary who for some reason has decided that now that her and James don’t hate each other they are suddenly going to fall in love.

“No Sirius?” she asks.

Mary sighs. “I invited him, but things are apparently still...tense, between that lot. James said he didn’t have a problem with him coming but Sirius seems to think it’ll be awkward.”

“Did you ask Remus?”

“Remus? Why?”

“Well, it’s him and Sirius who’re fighting I think,” Lily says, “James and Peter have just taken Remus’s side.”

“What—how do you know that?” Marlene interjects.

Lily shrugs even though they can't see her. "James told me—well, basically told me, anyway."

"Oh he did, did he?"

Lily can practically hear her eyebrows waggling on the other end of the phone. "Down girl."

"I'm just saying, you would make a hot couple."

"Ah well, with that sound logic."

"Sorry—but—what did he do? Sirius I mean." Marlene cuts in again. "I spent like all of the end of the year trying to figure out what could have happened. I mean, for James to turn on Sirius?" she lets out a low whistle. "Those two were like...I don't know..."

"Brothers?" Mary supplies. "Not that Sirius has terribly good luck with those, does he?"

There's a beat of shocked silence before Lily hisses. "Wow, Mary, that was particularly mean, even for you."

"Please tell me you didn't say that to him when you talked?"

Mary huffs. "You two have no faith in me—of course I didn't. But it doesn't mean I'm not right."

Neither of them want to touch that.

"I don't know what he did," Lily says instead. "James didn't say, neither did Remus."

"Damn," Marlene sighs. "I mean obviously, it's their business and everything but like—"

"I want to know too," Lily admits guiltily.

Mary makes a scoffing noise, "honestly you two, I know what happened."

There's a pause, Lily sitting bolt upright in her chair.

"What do you mean you know?" she demands.

"Yeah, what the hell Macdonald?"

Lily can't see her but she can just picture Mary—reclining slightly, smug look on her face while she shrugs off their indignation. A "sorry, it slipped my mind" smile pulling at her mouth.

"Like you said, it's their business."

Another pause.

"But you're going to tell us right?" Marlene prods.

Mary makes a little “hmpf” noise. “I could I suppose.”

For a solid five seconds Lily truly does think about murdering her.

“You don’t really know,” Marlene says finally, sounding as though she’s been debating with herself. “If you did half the school would have heard by now—ow, don’t start fighting with me Macdonald I have a Seeker’s reflexes!”

“Didn’t manage to dodge that hit.”

“I wasn’t ready.”

“I see, so you have a Seeker’s reflexes as long as someone notifies you in advance then?”

Marlene mumbles something under her breath that Lily can’t quite make out but she doubts is family friendly.

“Mary,” she says pointedly. “Do you know or not?”

“I have a theory.”

“That is not the same!” Marlene shouts indignantly.

“Oh well, sue me, it’s more than either of you have.”

“Go on then,” Lily says, still intrigued. “What’s your theory?”

“Simple,” Mary says, which Lily doesn’t think is a promising start, because whatever is going on between those boys, it certainly doesn’t seem simple. “Sirius made a move on Remus.”

Lily is so unprepared for that that for a second her brain doesn’t process it. Made Remus move what? Moved what on Remus? Moved Remus where? Her brain cycles through every combination of those words and their possible meanings before finally landing on what, of course, Mary is saying.

“Oh.”

It seems Marlene is similarly stunned because she doesn’t have much more to add.

“I expect the other three lads freaked out on him, stopped feeling comfortable sharing a room with him, changing in front of him.”

“No,” Marlene says finally. “No, they wouldn’t do that.”

“Boys are assholes about that kind of thing,” Mary goes on, undeterred. “You saw how they got at Christmas, with spin the bottle.”

Lily grimaces. She did, in fact, see that.

“McGonagall would never agree to kick him out of the dorm or off the Quidditch team for that, no way,” Marlene goes on.

Mary scoffs. “Why? Because she’s so progressive? And besides, anyone else notice that they moved him into a single room? Awfully strange punishment don’t you think? Unless the whole point was to keep him away from other boys?”

“Stop it,” Lily hears herself say.

“I’m not agreeing with it!” Mary says defensively. “I think it’s horrid. I love Sirius, you know I do. I just also think it makes sense,” after a small pause. “People are horrid.”

“James would never let that happen,” Marlene says finally, a new conviction in her voice.

“I told you, blokes are... I don’t know, they’re more sensitive about that sort of thing.”

“No,” Marlene says firmly. “Not James.”

“I agree with Marlene,” Lily pipes up, feeling slightly dazed by the whole situation.

“God, I forgot I was talking to James Potter’s bloody fan club—look ladies, I’m sorry to break it to you, but he’s a pigheaded jock just like the rest of them.”

Lily is shaking her head even before she speaks. “No—not about Sirius. He’d die for him,” she doesn’t know why she says it, but she knows it’s true. “The way he was talking—I don’t think this could be it. I don’t think Remus would react this way either. Besides, you’re forgetting about Severus.”

“Oh yeah!”

“What does Snape have to do with this?” Mary asks, Lily can hear the distaste in her voice.

“You remember Mary,” Marlene answers for her. “He was in the infirmary and then he had detentions with Sirius for the rest of the year—I keep forgetting about him. God, what a weird situation.”

“Could be unrelated.”

Lily snorts. “That’d be quite the coincidence. What even makes you think Sirius would—would be interested in Remus in that way? Bit out of left field that.”

There’s a pause, too long really, and Lily finds herself suddenly frustrated with the phone because she really wants to see what Mary’s face is doing right now.

“He told me,” she says eventually.

“He told you?” Marlene asks.

“What? Really?” Lily didn’t see that coming.

Another pause.

“Well, I mean, not exactly. He just sort of, said his name once. While we were hooking-up.”

Lily’s eyes go so wide she’s afraid they’re going to fall right out of her head. “Oh my God,” she hears herself say.

“Oh my God!” Marlene repeats on the other end of the line.

“You two are so dramatic,” Mary uses her most I’m-more-worldly-than-you tone.

“Is that why you two...stopped...seeing each other?”

Lily can hear the shrug in her voice. “Not exactly, but it certainly made things a bit awkward from then on. So I told him I was interested in Connor Davies, that way he wouldn’t have to feel bad about it.”

“Wow,” Lily says, “that was very decent of you Mary.”

“Some might even say nice,” Marlene adds.

Mary sniffs. “I can be nice.”

“Yeah, ‘course you can,” Marlene says, sounding like she’s holding in a laugh.

“I still don’t think that’s what caused the marauders to...” Lily trails off.

“Break up?” Marlene finishes for her.

“Yeah,” Lily runs a hand through her hair, turning to the window. She can see Remus that day in the courtyard, the sad look in his eyes, the way he was avoiding everyone. Mary’s theory just doesn’t feel...right somehow.

“Well, you two can believe whatever you like. Now, back to the party. We’re thinking big here Evans, an epic end of summer bash.”

Marlene makes a whining noise. “No—don’t say that—it’s not the end of summer yet.”

“Come now darling, everything good must come to a close.”

Lily watches as the cars drive a long the street, sun bright outside. This summer truly has been beautiful, if only it had been filled with less wedding madness she might have actually enjoyed it.

“—no, no way, you’re not allowed to make the punch again,” Marlene’s voice drifts through Lily’s daydreaming.

“And why not?”

“Because last time you nearly killed Dorcas.”

Lily used to love summer, but then, she supposes most kids do. Those days when all you do is run around outside until the sun sets. Coming back dirty and tired, with scuffed knees and stories to tell. She used to go monster hunting with Severus and then come back and tell her father all about it. He loved that stuff—once he made a book about it, all the monsters they'd caught. Lily still has it somewhere.

“Lily do you think you could pick that stuff up?”

When she first sees him she thinks she's making it up. She'd just been thinking about him after all. Maybe it's a trick of the light. Of her memories.

“Lily?”

But no. She blinks, wiping a hand across her eyes, and still he's there. Not a little kid anymore of course. Not as interested in hunting monsters as joining them.

“Sorry,” she hears herself say distantly into the receiver. “I have to go.”

She hangs the phone up, getting out of her chair and walking towards the window. He's standing across the street, hair longer than it was the last time she saw him. He always looks younger in muggle clothes. Softer.

He looks like he's still mine, her traitorous mind supplies.

She hasn't seen him all summer, she thought they'd come to some sort of agreement.

“Mum?” she calls as she shoves on her shoes. “I'm heading out.”

“Don't forget to buy my—“

She slams the door shut on her sister's voice, watching the boy across the street stand up straighter as she walks towards him, hands already shaking. She stops a few feet away on the pavement.

“Can I help you?”

He winces, looking down so that his hair falls forward, nearly swallowing him completely.

“I was hoping we could...talk.”

It's harder here, in the place where they met, where they grew up together—away from castles and magic and other people—it's harder to hate him.

“You were hoping we could talk,” she repeats coldly. “About what exactly?”

His eyes dart up off the pavement to meet her's, but only for a moment. “Lily—“

“Not Mudblood?” she interrupts. “Why so formal all of the sudden Severus? Or, I suppose now that no one's around it's alright for me to have a name?” she can already feel the tears

trying to weasel their way up her throat, but she has no intention of crying. Not again, not over this. She's tired and it's pointless.

Severus's next exhale punches out of him like he's just been hit. "I'm sorry—I told you—I didn't mean to say it, I was just—"

"Vulnerable," she cuts him off. "I understand how it happened Sev, but it came to you so fucking easily. So quickly. Like it didn't matter," there's a catch in her voice that she tries and fails to clear. "Tell me, if it had been Mary standing there instead of me, would you still have come slinking up to the Gryffindor common room to apologize?"

"It never would have been Macdonald."

Lily lets out a frustrated growl. "That's not the point Sev."

"Do you know why it never would have been her?" he goes on, not getting it. On his war path like always. You know, there had been a time when he had been an incredible listener. But these days she feels like he barely ever hears her.

"Because she's one of their bloody groupies."

"Oh my God," she throws her arms up in frustration. "This is so much more important than your petty bullshit with the marauders."

"This is all about them! And you used to be able to see it," he's lifted his head now, hair falling away from his eyes as they lock onto her's.

"See what Severus?"

"What a bunch of privileged narcissistic assholes they are. It would have made you furious what Potter did—"

"IT DID!" she yells, loud enough that he takes a step back. She is sure she is going to be getting complaints from the neighbours in a few minutes but she can't bring herself to care. "I stood up for you, I held my wand to his head, and you called me a Mudblood," her chest is heaving. "Years Sev, years I spent defending you to everyone and then, in front of the entire school, you showed them what an absolute fucking idiot I've been."

"Lily."

"To think that you were different—"

"Lily please—"

"— to believe that you were my friend, that you cared about me—"

"I do care about you!" he says desperately, and he sounds like he means it, really he does. The expression he usually wears, around school, that empty mask, it disappears when they're together. She used to think this was the real him. The person he was with her. Now she's not so sure.

“The thing is Severus, you don’t care about me,” God it hurts, like pouring salt in an open wound. “You care about you.”

He opens and closes his mouth, like he can’t figure out what to say. She doesn’t blame him. I mean, what’s left at this point?

“We just keep going in circles,” she says eventually. “So just...just go away okay? We’ve dragged this out enough.” She doesn’t wait for him to respond, turning on her heel and starting back towards the house

“Lily—oh come on, Lily please. Please, I’m trying here.”

“Trying?” she demands, stopping on her doorstep. “Trying to what? What are you even doing here Sev? Surely this all makes you sick,” she gestures to the building behind her. “Me and my muggle home and my muggle mum and my muggle sister, surely it all disgusts you?”

“You know it doesn’t.”

“How?” she tries to keep her volume in check, they’re too close to the house now and the last thing she needs is her mother or sister coming out here to see what’s going on. “How would I know that? You do realize that it’s not just that you’re friends don’t like me, right? They want me dead Sev,” saying it out loud makes a slightly hysterical laugh come out of her. Because it’s all so absurd. All so terrible.

“Nothing is going to happen to you,” he steps forward now, trying to close the space between them. Which is the last thing she needs. “I’ll keep you safe—I’ll protect you, always. Always Lily.”

There is something heartbreaking about it all. The swelling in his eyes, the sincerity, the way he reaches his hand out. She doesn’t know how they got here, but she can’t help feeling that it was all supposed to be different. That they were supposed to grow old together. She blames him for that. For breaking them. Because for a while, they really were something special.

“To what end Sev? Until I’m the last Mudblood on the planet—“

“Stop using that word,” he hisses.

“I’ll use it if I fucking want to,” she snaps back. “You can’t protect me. And if you really believe in all of this, in the Death Eaters and the violence and the Great Chain of Magical Beings, then I can’t figure out why you’d even want to.”

He used to be shorter than her, but he’s not anymore, she always forgets that until moments like this, when all of the sudden she realizes he’s looking down at her, taking up too much space in her chest.

“I want to,” he says, voice suddenly quiet, causing goose bumps to pebble her skin, “because I love you.”

It’s a reflex really. She’s barely thinking when she pulls her arm back and punches him right in the stomach. He doubles over immediately, clutching at his middle like he’s afraid he’s

going to split in half.

“Fuck you,” her voice shakes. “Stay the hell away from me.”

He looks like he’s about to say something but she’s not interested, slamming the door shut behind her and running up the stairs with her shoes still on. She can hear her mother and sister calling after her but she doesn’t answer, doesn’t turn around, shutting the door to her bedroom and collapsing against it.

And oh.

Oh hello.

Here they are.

Tears stream down her face as she chokes into her hand, trying not to make too much noise. Somehow she ends up on the ground, knees pulled into her chest, forehead resting on top of them. They’ve done this so many times by now, her and Sev, she doesn’t know why it still feels like this. Like cutting something out of herself.

I love you.

How dare he. How fucking dare he. After everything. After years.

I love you.

She lifts her head like that’ll help her breathe, sobs taking up all the space in her chest, leaving no room for air.

I love you.

It hurts because he does. Because she wants him to. Because she waited so long to hear him say it. So many nights when they got quiet and their hands got close and their noses almost touched. It hurts because it’s part of the reason she held on to him for so long. Held on to this. Because she knew deep down, everything she felt. Everything he felt. It hurts because she understands now that it isn’t enough. Loving someone. It doesn’t save you. Not in the end.

Petunia’s hen do is about as awful as one would expect. Pink and white decorations are strewn about the living room which slowly fills with women who are on ridiculous diets and therefore do not eat fancy cheeses and baguettes. Fine, Lily thinks, more for me. Admittedly, the cheese does help make her a little less miserable. Well, the cheese and the wine.

“You know,” a girl with a garish shade of orange lipstick says to her on one of her many trips to the food table. “I didn’t even know Petunia had a sister, isn’t that funny?”

Lily looks at her flatly. “Hilarious. Baguette?”

The woman looks a little startled. “Oh no, I’m not eating carbs.”

Lily isn't sure if she smiles or grimaces.

She sits in the corner with her plate of food and watches her sister make small talk and receive gifts and play games like Purse Scavenger Hunt and Pin the Veil on the Bride. Some sort of soft melodic music playing in the background.

Lily had always been under the impression that hen dos were meant to be a bit more wild than this, but then, she supposes she isn't surprised. Petunia doesn't do wild, not anymore. She does tight and ordered and stiff. Their grandmother, before she passed, had a case of little porcelain figurines, beautiful cherub looking things. Somedays Lily thinks that's Petunia's aspiration in life. To be a porcelain figure in a glass case.

"Lily," Petunia hovers over her chair. The heels she insisted Lily wear, even though they are in their own house, have been left in a heap on the carpet, her legs tucked up under her skirt. "Refill the refreshments please."

Lily's brow arches. After all, she's the only one who's been eating the refreshments, she can't really see the point in—

"Now," Petunia hisses, before floating away.

Rolling her eyes Lily heads towards the kitchen to get the rest of the food, maneuvering her way through the sea of women who are all dressed up far too much to just be puttering around their living room.

"-selfish. Spends all her time at that posh boarding school, barely ever comes home. Petunia has to manage everything."

The sound of voices causes Lily to stop in the hallway, hidden from the people talking in the kitchen.

"How can they even afford it? I mean, I was under the impression that their mother hasn't much money?"

"They can't, but apparently she won't hear of going anywhere else. Like I said, selfish. Did you know that she didn't even come home for their father's funeral?"

Lily takes a step back, feeling as though she's just been hit, her face burning. The two women are still talking but she can't hear anything, the buzzing in her ears growing too loud. It's not until someone laughs somewhere behind that she starts moving again. She needs to get out of here. She needs to breathe.

Without thinking she pushes her way through the house, sliding out the back door and into the garden. The fresh air feels good on her hot skin, pulse going a mile a minute as she presses her back against the house and inhales, eyes falling closed.

She'd only been twelve when her father died. She would have come home, she would have been here, if she could have been. But it had happened so suddenly. A car accident. No warning. No preparation. There are no telephones at Hogwarts, if her mother was a witch she

could have used the floo, but, of course, she isn't. Lily hadn't had an owl then, because her mother didn't know where they would keep it during the summer (and honestly, they couldn't afford it). Which meant that the only way to contact her, was through the Muggle post.

Letters addressed to Hogwarts do make it there, but it takes time. More time than an owl. So by the time Lily found out about her father's death, by the time all the arrangements were made for her to be able to floo her mum, to speak with her, a week had passed. Her father was buried. The funeral over.

Even now Lily feels the ache of that pain cut through her. How fucking devastated she had been. How lonely. Sometimes being Muggle born feels like floating—with no anchor, no port. She belongs nowhere. In the magic world she's a person without a history—magical families have legacies and friendships that stretch back millennia. They know who their great-great-great grandfather's were (sometimes they've even spoken to them, if they have portraits). Lily has none of that, no link to the magical world, no familiar faces, she's on her own. In the Muggle world she finds it hard to relate to people. There's a whole part of reality that they know nothing about, a whole part of her that they know nothing about, and she's never sure how to bridge that gap.

She startles at the sound of the screen door opening, looking over to find her sister stepping out into the yard. Petunia walks forward, not seeing Lily yet, and takes in a deep breath, letting her face tilt up towards the sky on the exhale. After a few seconds she reaches into the pocket of her skirt and pulls out a packet of cigarettes.

"And after all the shit you've given me for smoking," Lily says, voice sounding loud in the quiet.

Petunia whips around, eyes narrowing as she picks Lily out of the dark.

"What are you doing out here?"

"What are YOU doing out here?" Lily repeats petulantly. Even in the dark she can see her sister roll her eyes.

"Whatever," Petunia turns back around, looking out over the garden as she brings the cigarette to her mouth, the burning tip the brightest thing in the yard. Lily knows the smart thing for her to do would be to go inside. Nothing good ever comes from the two of them being left alone together. But she's had just enough wine to feel reckless.

"Why are you doing this?"

"Doing what?" her sister asks, without turning around.

"This," Lily gestures at the house, at the dismal party going on inside. "Getting married. You're barely out of school, you have so much time, and Vernon—"

"I'd be careful if I were you," there is danger in her tone.

"He's not a match for you," Lily says anyway.

Petunia actually laughs at that, tilting her head back and blowing smoke up into the sky, catching the moonlight. “No,” she says finally, “he isn’t.”

Well, Lily thinks, at least we can agree on that.

“Does he just look right then? Is that it? Very domestic, very proper, straight-laced.”

“Something like that.”

Behind them the noise of the party drifts closer, someone’s started playing ABBA, there’s the sound of laughing, the buzz of polite conversation.

“Dad would hate him,” which is the wrong thing to say on every level. But the wine is still thrumming through her and so is the pain from conversation she overheard in the kitchen.

Petunia finally turns around. “Don’t you talk to me about dad.”

“I’ll talk about whatever I want.”

“You weren’t here—“

“That’s not my fault!” Lily steps forward now, off of the wall, into her sister’s space, trying to restrain her childish desire to kick and scream and throw a temper tantrum.

Not my fault.

Not my fault.

Not my fault.

“It is your fault,” Petunia jabs her cigarette at her. “You chose that school.”

Lily blinks, slightly taken off guard. “What?”

“You could have stayed here, you could have stayed with us. But you chose to go off and leave us behind. So you weren’t here. Not when the police showed up, not when we had to identify the body, not when we buried him,” chills run up Lily’s spine and she does her best not to flinch. “I was the one who had to plan the funeral—“

“You had mum!” Lily interrupts, finding her voice. “I had no one, I was alone.”

“Ha!” Petunia laughs cruelly. “Mum was bloody catatonic. I had to force her to get out of bed, to eat, to shower. I started sleeping in her room because I was afraid to leave her alone, afraid she was going to—“ but her voice cuts out, and Lily can see her hand shaking as she takes another drag from her cigarette, turning away again.

Lily doesn’t know what to do with any of this, her chest a storm of feelings she can’t work through. “Why didn’t you tell me?” she whispers finally.

Petunia sends her a sharp look, eyes bright under the stars. “You. Weren’t. Here,” another pause, and then; “So yes, Vernon is boring and predictable. But at least I will always know where he is and when he’s coming home and I won’t have to worry about him running off places I can’t follow or getting drunk and trying to fucking drive himself home.” Her voice breaks and Lily feels her chest grow tight, feels herself struggle to breathe.

They never talk about that apart.

The part where their father was twice over the legal limit.

The part where it was his fault.

“Maybe dad would have hated him,” Petunia goes on eventually, throwing her cigarette on the ground and turning back towards the house. “But to be perfectly honest I couldn’t care less about that man’s opinion,” the pain in her voice makes the words difficult to believe. Her eyes meet Lily’s, running her up and down, a familiar look of disgust on her face. “You’re just like him you know?”

And with that she goes back inside.

Mary calls the next day, asking Lily to pick up some last minute things for the party and she can’t say yes fast enough. Anything to get out of the house. Anything to get away from her sister.

Technically, she doesn’t need to go to Diagon Alley to get the things Mary asked for. But, the truth is, she misses magic. Desperately. So she takes the train into London and then walks to the Leaky Cauldron, getting butterflies in her stomach as the familiar brick wall dissolves in front of her revealing the bustling wizarding street on the other side. She feels instantly as though a weight has been lifted off of her.

Her eyes bounce everywhere, sucking all of it in, feeling her own magic humming below her skin, desperate to get free. Mary says she can never decide which she likes better—the Muggle world or the wizarding one. Lily doesn’t have that problem. For all its faults, she loves magic. Loves it to bits.

She gets some sweets for tomorrow even though she can already see Mary rolling her eyes “We’re not six Lily” she’ll say. Personally, Lily takes great offence at the idea that only six-year-olds are allowed to get excited about candy. She also gets butterbeer and ice cream from Florean’s—that’s just for her—and is debating going into the bookshop when she hears her name called out behind her.

“Lily Evans, as I live and breathe.”

Sirius Black is sauntering towards her through the crowd, leather jacket over his tight black t-shirt and jeans. She smiles because it just feels so right—like yes, of course this is how he dresses outside of school.

“Fancy seeing you here.”

He gives her a one armed hug that she can only lean into because of the aforementioned bags and ice cream.

“Ah,” he says, scanning the display window she’d been admiring. “Last minute school shopping?”

She shakes her head. “Actually, I was thinking of just going in for fun.”

“Course you were,” shakes his head. “Waisting your last few precious days of freedom reading. Doesn’t surprise me at all.”

Lily rolls her eyes. “Oh please, you’re basically top of our year, so you’ll have to excuse me if I don’t buy the whole ‘reading is lame’ routine.”

Sirius shoots her a wolfish grin, “You got me,” he leans his head a little closer to her’s. “Don’t tell anyone though, okay? I’ve a reputation to uphold.”

“Scouts honour.”

His eyebrows draw together in confusion. “Scouts?”

Lily smiles a little, “Never mind, Muggle thing.”

“Huh,” he nods thoughtfully before his eyes drop down to the bags in her hands. “What d’you got there?”

It takes Lily a minute to answer because she’s just shoved the rest of her ice cream cone in her mouth. “Party supplies,” she says, mouth still partially full.

Sirius gives her a bemused sort of smile. “You know, you’re adorable when you’re being gross.”

She swallows before letting out a laugh, the back of her hand coming to her mouth, trying to hold some of it back. “That might be my favourite compliment—or insult? I’m not sure which honestly.”

“Compliment,” he confirms. “Definitely a compliment. So, you’re throwing a party then?”

“What—oh! No, no,” she holds up the bags. “These are for Mary’s thing tomorrow.”

“Ah,” she sees just the slightest dimming of his eyes and feels her heart give a pull.

“She said you didn’t think you should come?”

Sirius shrugs in an overly casual gesture, hands shoving themselves into his pockets. “Well, you know...” he looks back at the shop window.

“Things are still...tense between you lot then? I would have thought, what with you living at James’s house...”

Sirius lets out a breath of laughter. “Yes, that has been a little tricky,” he pauses and then; “Things with James are actually...alright, I think,” his faces scrunches up like he’s trying to work out something complicated. “We’re not fighting anymore but we’re not...not normal.”

“Thus why you’re here alone.”

“Yeah,” he smiles dryly, “thus why I’m here alone.”

There’s a pause, Sirius still looking very resolutely at the book display and Lily looking at him.

“If you and James are...better,” she settles on eventually. “Then I can’t imagine he would mind you coming to the party?”

Sirius grimaces. “It’s not him I’m worried about.”

“Ah,” she says knowingly, trying not to think about what Mary said the other day, because really, she shouldn’t know any of it anyway and besides, she doesn’t believe it. Doesn’t believe Remus would cut him off just for...

“That’s where they are now,” Sirius goes on when she doesn’t. Lily gets the sense that he hasn’t had many people to talk to this summer, “Remus’s. You know I’ve never been to his house before? Best mates five years and I’ve never been to his house. James has—I mean now he’s been loads, but even before. It didn’t really bother me then but now, now I think that maybe it’s because Remus always knew, deep down.”

“Knew what?” Lily asks, voice gentle.

“That he couldn’t trust me.”

It hurts, the way he says it. So strange to see Sirius Black anything but cocky and carefree. She finds herself reaching out and squeezing his arm.

“I don’t believe that.”

“It’s not a casual thing for him, having people at his house, meeting his parents. He guards those parts of himself, keeps them safe, shares them with the people he believes in most,” he shrugs. “I guess I was never one of them. He’s always been a good judge of character our Moony.”

“Sirius,” she ducks her head, trying to get him to meet her eye again. Eventually it works. “People don’t get upset—don’t get hurt—by just having their suspicions confirmed. He did trust you, and maybe whatever you did broke that, but broken things can be fixed.”

He looks about as earnest as she’s ever seen him. “Not all of them.”

She thinks of Petunia, standing in the garden at night, her voice breaking.

You weren't here.

It is your fault.

Lily shakes her head, trying to shut those thoughts off. "Come to the party," she says suddenly.

Sirius looks at her skeptically, but Lily doubles down.

"Come to the party Sirius. You know, you do have other friends besides those three."

And that, finally, brings the light back to his face. "Not so long ago you would have stuck a nail in your eye before admitting to being my friend."

"Pfft," she scoffs. "You're being dramatic."

He gives her a pointed look.

"Oh alright, maybe in first and second year."

The look continues.

"And third year," she concedes eventually, "but you were definitely growing on me by fourth year."

Sirius laughs. "I am an acquired taste."

"Like caviar."

He taps the tip of his nose like they're in cahoots. "Like caviar."

She smiles, "Come to the party Sirius," she says for the third time. "You'll all have to be together in a week when we go back to school anyway."

He continues to look unconvinced. "I'll think about it."

"Thinking doesn't strike me as one of your strong suits."

He laughs, big and barking, "Oh, you have no idea."

The sun has started getting heavier in the sky, hanging low and threatening to sink below the horizon. The crowds on the street have thinned but only slightly. It's summer, so it's never completely empty, people sitting outside on patios and inside at candlelit tables.

"Hey," Sirius jabs her with his elbow, "you got any plans tonight Evans?"

"Jesus, do you sharpen your elbows or something?" she asks, rubbing her side. "And no, not really, why?"

"Let's get dinner, the Leaky, my treat."

She lets out a huff of laughter. "You asking me on a date, Black?"

"Gingers aren't really my type."

"Oi!"

"First off," he says, while annoyingly dodging her fist, "I share a dorm room with three marauders, if you wanna hit me you're going to have to be faster than that," she glares at him. "Secondly, are you saying you want to be my type?" he raises his eyebrows at her suggestively.

"Ew, no."

He laughs, swinging his arm around her shoulders. "Glad we're on the same page freckles, now, come on, let me buy you dinner. I'm rich now, did you know?"

"Just now?" she says, allowing herself to be dragged down the street. "I thought you were always rich. I thought being rich was like 85% of your personality."

"Nah, my family was rich. But now I, personally, Sirius Black III, am rich."

"The III? Really? There are three of you?"

"Well, not currently."

She snorts. "In that case, I hope you know I'm getting the most expensive thing on the menu."

Sirius grins. "I'd expect nothing less."

The next day Lily gets to Mary's house early to help set up. They mix drinks and listen to music and get dressed. Getting ready is honestly Lily's favourite part of going out. She likes the ritual of it, the easiness. Just the three of them giggling and dancing like goofs. Not trying to impress anyone.

"Well, well, look at you," Lily says as Mary walks out of the bathroom in a mini dress that on anyone else would be trying too hard but on Mary is absolutely divine.

"Thank you, thank you," she gives a little bow.

"Ow ow!" Marlene whistles as she walks in with the punchbowl, setting it down on the table they've set up in the living room. Mary's parents are on vacation with her little brother so they have the place to themselves. The one downside being that there's no floo so everyone will have to get there the muggle way, well, except for Alice and Frank who can apparate.

Lily flips the record, turning the volume up. "God I love this song."

“You say that about every song,” Mary quips, earning her a rude hand gesture from Lily that makes Marlene laugh.

It’s not long before there’s a loud crack in the front hall and then: “WHO’S READY TO PARTY BITCHES!”

“I think Alice might be here,” Marlene says dryly as the short, dark haired girl bursts into the living room, a bottle in each hand.

“What an entrance Prewett,” Mary pulls the older girl into a hug as Frank rounds the corner significantly more quietly.

“Hey Captain,” Marlene grins.

“Not anymore I’m not,” he laughs, rubbing the back of his neck. Alice moves on to hug Marlene, dropping her bottles off on the table before making her way to Lily.

“Hey babes,” she pulls her into a quick embrace, “haven’t seen you in ages.”

“You’ve been busy.”

Alice lets out something between a laugh and a groan. “Haven’t I ever.”

Lily opens her mouth to ask more but Mary’s voice cuts across the room, eyes on Frank.

“So who did get the badge of honour in the end, since I noticed you made the grave mistake of not naming me as your successor,” Mary’s leaning against the wall, hip cocked, eyes glittering in that way they do where you can’t tell if she’s flirting with you or threatening you.

“That’ll be Potter.”

Marlene groans. “I bloody knew it, he’s going to be insufferable.”

“Insufferable? He’s going to be a monster. Watch, I bet the little Quidditch freak makes us start practice at five in the morning,” Mary says disdainfully.

“You guys aren’t giving him enough credit,” Frank, ever the earnest one. “I think he’ll do a really good job of it, honestly.”

Mary rolls her eyes. “Please, that’s just because you’re in love with him.” “I’m in love with Alice, thank you very much.”

“Yes dear, but you do get a bit of glazed look in your eyes when you watch James fly,” Alice sing-songs, causing Frank to let out a series of mortified choking noises.

“I—they do not!”

Lily really does try not to laugh, but he just looks so precious, blushing and spluttering. Alice links her arm through Lily’s pulling her in close as though the whole room can’t still hear what she’s saying.

“He thinks I don’t know about his little crushes but I do.”

“Oh my God,” Frank passes a hand over his flushed face. “I need a drink.”

“Right here Frankie-boy!” Marlene grins from the table, lifting up her own cup. “What do you want?”

“Something strong.”

“That’ll be Mary’s punch then.”

Frank makes a slightly queasy expression. “Ugh, maybe not that strong.”

“Aw, big tough Auror can’t handle a little punch?” Mary says in a baby voice.

The teasing does not appear to phase Frank, who starts pouring himself a glass of firewhiskey and apple juice. “Not if you’ve had anything to do with it.”

Alice and Lily meander over to the others, getting their own drinks.

“Oooh, we should toast,” Mary holds up her cup.

Lily arches her brow, “Should we?” at nearly the same time that Marlene asks; “To what?”

“I don’t know, to us!”

“To us?” Marlene repeats. “Not a very inspiring toast Mary.”

“I still don’t understand why we’re toasting at all?”

Mary rolls her eyes at the both of them while Alice snickers. “Fine. To being young and beautiful and hooking up with Amos Diggory tonight.”

Marlene makes a retching noise.

“Yeah,” Lily agrees, wrinkling her nose. “I’m not toasting to that.”

“I am also not toasting to that,” Frank pipes up, looking thoroughly disturbed.

“Oh Jesus, you lot are so high-maintenance,” she shakes out her shoulders and tries again. “To winning the Quidditch cup this year.”

“Here here,” Frank and Marlene immediately raise their glasses, and with such enthusiasm that some of their drinks rain down on the table.

“Better than Amos Diggory I guess,” Lily tries to hide her smile at Marlene’s affronted look, all of them clinking their glasses together.

People start arriving quickly after that, Mary's house filling up with a surprising number of strangers. Lily had assumed that she would know most of the people coming but she seems to have miscalculated Mary's popularity. A rookie move. The woman in question is nowhere to be found. She had been draping herself over Amos's lap on the sofa not ten minutes ago, but now Lily can't find the couple anywhere. Not that she's really looking, that's one thing she absolutely does not need to walk in on.

It's hot, too hot really, even with all the windows and doors open. Lily sticks mostly to the wall, something about standing in the open always makes her feel awkward and suddenly she'll forget what she's supposed to do with her arms and legs—at least when there's a wall she has a prop to work with.

"We have got to stop meeting like this."

Lily turns to find Sirius leaning next to her, his hair is pulled back tonight, likely because of the heat. It ought to look ridiculous but, as with everything, it kind of suits him.

"You came," she says smugly.

"Ah well, after you practically begged me to—"

"Um, excuse me?" she demands in mock indignation. "I don't remember any begging."

He cocks his eyebrow. "Really? I could've sworn there was begging. Then again, maybe that was the dream I had last night, except in that you weren't wearing any—"

"OH MY GOD Sirius," she punches his arm, and this time he actually stands still. "You are unbelievable you know that? I thought gingers weren't your type."

He laughs. "Meh, depends on the day really."

"Incorrigible."

"So I've been told."

She shakes her head, smiling despite herself as she looks back out at the party. She can see Remus and Peter now, standing on the other side of the room with Frank and some seventh year boy Lily barely recognizes. She turns back to Sirius and finds him staring in the same direction.

"Have you talked to them?" she asks.

He shakes his head, not dropping his gaze.

"They know you're here?"

"I told James to check with Remus, see if it was okay."

"Well, that's encouraging," she pauses, Sirius still looking at his friends. "I'm assuming he didn't say no?"

Sirius lets out a dry laugh. “No, he didn’t say no. But you’ve met him, he never would, even if he wanted to.”

Lily isn’t sure if that’s actually true, but then, she wonders if maybe it’s just that Remus would never say no to Sirius.

“Are you going to talk to them?”

Sirius grimaces, finally turning back to her. “I don’t think that’d be a good idea. Peter’d probably talk back but he’d be stressed out the whole time.”

“And Remus?”

He sighs. “God, I don’t know,” he’s looking at him again, like he can’t help it, and Lily feels her heart ache for him a little. He really does look heartbroken. Fuck, she thinks, maybe Mary was right.

She opens her mouth to speak but before she can the undeniable voice of Alice Prewett cuts through the party.

“SIRIUS!”

They both turn to look as Alice hops up and down, trying to be seen over the tops of people’s shoulders.

“GET YOUR CUTE ASS OVER HERE!”

Sirius grins. “How gone is she?” he asks.

“Give her a break, it’s her first day off in months.”

“That Auror training’s really something huh?”

“Who would have thought.”

“SIRIUS—“

“Yes darling, I’m coming!” he trills, attempting to forge a path through the crowd. He looks back at Lily over his shoulder. “Coming?”

She waves him off. “You go, I think I need to step out for a minute, get some fresh air.”

He nods. “Alright, I’ll find you later yeah?”

“Yeah, definitely.”

Sirius is promptly swallowed by the wall of bodies in front of them, and when Lily’s eyes trail back over to the other side of the room she finds Remus watching him.

Jesus, she thinks, what a mess.

She does eventually manage to make it out into the backyard. Sweat suddenly cold on her skin as the night air brushes against her. There's one or two people she doesn't know standing by the house so she decides to venture further out into the garden. It's dark, but the stars are bright tonight, brighter than they've been all summer, so Lily doesn't mind.

It's because of the lack of light that it takes her so long to notice him. James Potter, lying on the grass, looking up at the sky. She freezes for a moment, just staring at him, wondering if she should turn back—surely she's had enough of the marauders for one night? But her traitorous feet don't start towards the house again, instead they make a B-line straight for him.

“Hey,” she says lamely, and then nearly makes a u-turn right back around because what is she even doing? It's not like she has anything to say to him.

James blinks up at her, eyes cloudy and a little blood shot. Ah, she thinks, he's drunk.

“Did you fall or are you down there on purpose?” she asks.

He snorts. “On purpose.”

She nods, pausing for a moment before sitting down next to him, crossing her legs and looking up. She's always liked astronomy, even if it is a bit trickier than some of her other classes. There's something nice about the way it's always there, in the sky, no matter where you are. After a few seconds James pushes himself up so that he's sitting too, though he's a bit clumsy about it.

“How long have you been here Potter?”

“Er—dunno—hour maybe?”

She quirks her brow. “Really been throwing them back huh?”

“Hm,” he hums, eyes still on the sky. “Punch.”

That checks out.

“You ought to know better than to touch Mary's punch.”

But he shakes his head. “Nah, this is good,” he closes his eyes for a minute. “This feels better...even if the world is spinning a bit.”

There's something sad in his voice that catches her off guard. “Feels better than what?”

“I miss, I miss, I miss.”

“Wow, you really are drunk.”

His eyes blink open again. “Yeah.”

They sit in silence, the party rumbling on behind them, an indistinct mess of music and shouting. Lily wonders if she should leave him alone but she can't quite seem to make herself move. Maybe she's drunker than she thought? Though to be honest she feels almost painfully sober right now.

"So who is it then?" she decides to ask.

He blinks, looking over at her. "What?"

"Who is it you're out here missing?"

He looks oddly panicked for a second. "I didn't say—I didn't say there was—right? I didn't say anything—anyone—I didn't say there was anyone. Jesus," he brings his fingers up and pinches the bridge of his nose.

Lily gives him a minute, and then; "No one gets this melancholic over something that doesn't have a heartbeat."

He laughs at that. "Might be true, though you've never seen the way Sirius looks at his leather Jacket."

Lily smiles. "I can imagine."

James sighs, looking back out at the sky. Lily waits for him to answer her question but when he speaks that's not what happens.

"You see those stars?" he asks, pointing at a cluster just above her.

"Um—yeah?"

"That's," he stops, swallows, starts again, "that's Ophiuchus, it's supposed to be a guy wrestling with a snake, I looked it up. I always look up the things he—anyway—apparently he tried to warn the Trojans about the Trojan Horse, so the gods sent a pair of sea serpents to punish him."

Lily looks from James to the stars. "Huh, didn't realize you knew so much about Muggle myths."

"I don't," she waits for him to explain but he doesn't.

She keeps looking at the constellation—Ophiuchus—tilting her head to the side. "It kinda looks like a turtle."

And that gets a laugh out of him, a proper one, probably bigger than it would have been if he was sober. "Right? That's what I said, but he was all—" James stops abruptly, coughing like that will make it more natural.

Lily looks over at him. "He? Sirius you mean?" because his whole family is named after stars so if anyone's been teaching James Potter about the constellations it makes sense that it would be him.

“Er—sure,” but James almost immediately pulls a face. “Ugh, actually no, no, definitely not, too gross.”

“Gross?”

“Evans, what’s with the questions huh? I’m too drunk for questions.”

Lily holds her hands up in surrender. “Hey, you’re the one going on astronomy rants not me.”

“Yeah, well, again,” he points at his face, “drunk. I don’t know what the fuck I’m doing. You’re supposed to be the responsible one here, stop me.”

Lily laughs. “Stop you? Stop you what? Talking.”

“Yes. Please.”

She sits there for a moment, traitorous eye dropping to his mouth which—no, ew, what—she quickly looks away, reaching into her back pocket and pulling out her cigarettes. She’s going to have to quit after this summer. It wasn’t a habit before now, just something she did on hard days. But then, maybe there have been more hard days recently.

She puts one between her fingers before offering the box to James, he looks skeptical.

“Didn’t peg you for a smoker Evans.”

“So you do know what they are.”

He looks up, affronted. “Of course I know what they are.”

Lily shrugs, “It’s hard to tell with wizards.”

“I’m mildly offended by that.”

“Good.”

He snorts, looking back down at the pack.

“You don’t have to take one you know?” she says, watching him hesitate.

“Right,” he rubs the back of his neck. “Thing is, okay, I know what they are, I just don’t... don’t quite know how they...work.”

Lily does her best to stifle a laugh. “God and they think you’re the bad one, Remus at least had some idea what he was doing.”

James’s eyes flash up. “Have you been corrupting my Moony?”

“Your Moony?” she arches her brow, trying to ignore the bit of her stomach that flutters at the adorableness of the statement.

“Did you think he belonged to someone else?” James asks.

“I wasn’t aware he belonged to anyone.”

“Well,” he looks down and, with a little trepidation, pulls a cigarette out of the pack, “now you know.”

“Right,” she bites down on a smile, “And Peter?”

James nods. “Also mine.”

“I can’t quite see the point in asking but—“

“Yes, Sirius too, honestly Evans, I thought you were supposed to be clever, keep up,” he snaps his fingers and Lily laughs.

“I guess I didn’t realize you were quite so territorial.”

“Clearly you haven’t been paying enough attention to me.”

“Clearly,” she repeats, amused. “Alright, put this,” she holds up her cigarette, “between your lips, I’m going to light the end and you’re going to inhale okay? Inhale and hold it, right in your chest.”

James is looking at her like she’s insane. “You’re going to light it while it’s in my mouth?”

“Yes.”

Looking very concerned he does as she asked. “Just know,” he talks around the cigarette, “that if you burn my face I will sue you.”

“What a posh threat,” she holds her fingers beneath his smoke and snaps. It always gives her a bit of a thrill when that works.

James’s eyes widen slightly, but he inhales before he can speak and then immediately starts coughing.

“Merlin’s tits,” he wheezes. “Oh my God,” Lily is laughing so hard she can’t light her own cigarette. “That’s fucking awful,” tears are spilling out of the corners of his eyes. “What the fuck Evans, what the actual shite is this?” his free hand clutches at his chest as he doubles over.

“It gets better,” Lily finally manages, winded from her laughter. “The first one is the hardest.”

“Gets better?” he wipes at his eyes with the back of his hand. “I should fucking hope so.” His face is bright red and wet, eyes all puffy, holding the cigarette away from his body like it’s a bomb he’s afraid is going to go off.

“Just—just try again,” Lily is still struggling to keep her giggling under control.

“It’ll be better this time? You promise?” he gives the cigarette sidelong look.

“Sure, yeah, just, you have to breathe in deep, into your chest,” she points unhelpfully at her sternum.

“Yeah I fucking breathed in Evans that’s the god damn problem, shit,” he spits on the grass next to him. “Okay, okay I’m trying this once more but I swear if it’s not better—“

“You’ll sue me, I got it. Big deep breath, hold it, let it out.”

“Uh-huh,” he looks thoroughly unimpressed as he brings the cigarette back to his mouth and takes a tentative inhale. Instantly he starts coughing again.

“Oh—f—fuck you,” he sputters, now shoving the cigarette at her. Lily slips the unlit one behind her ear and takes James’s. “Evans you dirty fucking liar.” He has his hands on his knees, bracing himself as he tries to breathe through it, Lily cackling beside him.

“I can’t believe you’re so bad at this,” though she sounds very pleased about it.

“Literally how can you be good at it—it’s like breathing fire into your lungs.” He wipes his hand across his face, finally able to sit up straight again.

Lily smiles as she brings the cigarette to her mouth and inhales, then tilts her head back and blows rings up into the sky.

“WHAT THE HELL!” James yells—literally yells—jabbing an accusing finger at her. “It’s a spell, it has to be.”

But she shakes her head, still grinning. “Nope, this is all Muggle my friend.”

He shakes his head, running a hand through the mess of hair on his head. “How?”

“Practice.”

“Why would you practice if it always feels like shit the first time?”

Lily shrugs. “Looks cool I guess.”

“Ugh, fuck off, you sound like Sirius.” And then; “Do not, I repeat, under any circumstances, show him these hell sticks—“

“Hell sticks?” Lily laughs.

“—I’ll never know peace again,” he goes on, ignoring her. “He’ll start smoking them all the bloody time.”

“I mean, they certainly do match his look.”

James fixes her with a pointed stare. “Lily.”

“Oh okay, I won’t, cross my heart,” she makes the motion with her hand.

He shakes his head again, collapsing back down onto the grass. “I never would have thought you’d be one to do it for the aesthetic Evans.”

I’m not, she almost says, but honestly, she doesn’t feel like having the dead dad conversation right now.

“Well, I’ve got to put in a little more effort now that I don’t have someone following me around proposing to me every five minutes.”

James groans. “First of all, I never proposed—“

“Mm, pretty sure you did. Third year, middle of Magical Creatures.”

“That was a joke!”

“Sure it was,” she’s glad it’s so dark, glad he can’t see the blush that is, for some reason, making its way to the tops of her cheeks.

“Besides, I was never that interested in your looks anyway.”

Lily lets out a startled laugh. “You really know how to make a girl feel special Potter.”

“What—“ and then she sees his eyes go wide. “Oh come on, that’s not what I meant, you know that’s not what I meant.”

She looks at him, brow raised. “Do I?”

James rolls his eyes before propping himself up on his elbows. “You’re beautiful, you know you’re beautiful,” the blush starts to burn but Lily can’t seem to break eye contact with him. “But there are a lot of beautiful girls, most girls honestly.”

Lily snorts at that and he shoots her a sheepish grin.

“I liked you because the first day we met you put me in my place,” he laughs a little, hand running over his face. “You’re a fucking force Lily Evans and you always have been, trying to get your attention was like chasing after a storm—terrifying and exhilarating and unbelievable every time.”

It’s only when he stops that Lily realizes she’s been holding her breath. Unsure what to do with herself she starts giving the cigarette in her hand a bit too much attention.

“Well,” she says after her next exhale, “when you put like that.”

“Sorry, I’m drunk, I’m not sure I’m explaining this right.”

Lilly quickly shakes her head. “No, you—you are, thank you.”

His face scrunches. “Thank you?”

But all she can do is shrug.

They lapse into silence again, Lily trying very hard to focus on the grass in front of her, fingers nervously flicking at the cigarette in her hand, while James looks up at the sky.

“I’m glad that we’re friends now,” he says eventually, not dropping his eyes. “I think it’s better this way, don’t you?”

Something in the pit of her stomach violently disagrees but she holds it down, smothering it. “Yeah,” she manages after a brief pause, “better as friends.”

Chapter End Notes

HELLO!

The next chapter is ALL Regulus I swear, but I always feel like the girls get a little neglected and also I just had a fun time writing this chapter so I hope you had a fun time reading it!!

Thank you for taking the time to read my lil story, I appreciate it a ton! Your comments are always enjoyed!

Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

You know it's a Regulus chapter when there are all these TWs honestly I'm sorry

TW: Referenced sexual assault

TW: Animal abuse (nothing is graphically described cause that would be TERRIBLE but you know it's happening)

TW: Child abuse (via magic)

** Also, I realize I operate under the assumption that everyone knows the story of Achilles and Patroclus, but incase you do not, real quick thing you might want to know for this chapter (Iliad spoilers???) : Achilles gets angry at Agamemnon (for being just generally garbage), and refuses to fight for him, the Greeks get crushed by the Trojans without him so Patroclus dresses up in Achilles's armour to scare the Trojans away and that's how he gets killed by Hector (if you do know the story and are like "girl this is a terrible summary" I know and I'm sorry)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

There's no point in screaming.

It took Regulus a long time to learn that. He expects that's Sirius's fault. As long as he was here, there was always the chance that someone might come.

No one comes anymore.

Regulus is on the ground, feeling as though he's had the skin flayed from his bones. He can't tell where the borders of his body end anymore. He is just pain. No longer stuck behind the lines of his fingers and toes. He has no shape. He is bleeding out

"Up."

No.

"Get. Up."

No.

He doesn't move, doesn't think he can, can't remember why he ever wanted to.

"Regulus, get up."

"I can still Crucio him on the ground."

“That’s not the point—GET UP.”

A boot slides under him and flips him clumsily onto his back.

“Fuck,” he blinks his eyes open, finding Lucius hovering overtop of him.

“Well look at that, he is alive,” he gives him another kick and Regulus curls onto his side, a pathetic attempt to protect himself.

“No, no,” it’s someone else who grabs him under his arms and pulls him up. “No more hiding.”

Rodolphus—that’s who picked him up—gives him a shove and he stumbles, legs shaking as he tries to keep himself standing.

“This didn’t have to be so difficult, you know,” Lucius grabs his jaw and forces his head up. Being this close to him always makes Regulus’s skin crawl, his pulse jackhammering in his chest.

“Cast the curse Regulus, that’s all we’re asking. According to your parents you get excellent marks, very bright, this really shouldn’t be so hard.”

“I’ve tried,” Reg manages finally, teeth clenched. “I can’t.”

Lucius’s hand starts squeezing, and Regulus is too tired to hold back the yelp it pulls from his throat.

“Try. Harder.”

Lucius lets go, gesturing towards the pen that’s been set up in the middle of the yard. There are two bunnies in it. Well. There were. One is dead now. Bella got a little overzealous during her demonstration. Not to worry though, she doesn’t need a bunny when she has Regulus.

“Go on Reg,” Narcissa is standing a little further back from the others, watching with a tense look on her face.

Regulus swallows, trying to get his eyes to focus before raising his wand. He’s not sure what the problem is anymore. At first he didn’t want to, but now? Now he’d do just about anything to put an end to this.

“Crucio,” he says, with as much authority as he can muster.

Nothing happens. The bunny continues eating grass, Regulus’s wand continues to be absolutely useless in his hand. He closes his eyes. Fuck.

That’s about all he has time to think before another “Crucio” rings out behind him and suddenly he’s on fire again.

When he comes to he’s back on the ground, Lucius crouched beside him, elegant brow arched. There’s a new expression on his face—pity, Regulus thinks.

“You really aren’t doing yourself any favours here,” Lucius reaches out and brushes the hair off of Regulus’s forehead. Regulus hates it. Hates that he’s touching him, hates that he’s too weak to do anything about it.

“C’mon,” Lucius grabs him by the arm and pulls him back to his feet. The world swims around Regulus and he has to close his eyes to keep from throwing up.

“Alright, maybe that’s enough Crucio for today huh? Why don’t you just Avada the thing.”

“That wasn’t the plan Lucius,” Rodolphus grumbles in the background. “The kid’s supposed to learn all three.”

When Regulus opens his eyes again he’s met with Lucius’s stare, still on him even when he answers.

“Yeah well, if you want him to learn anything you’re going to need to control your wife.”

There are spots in Regulus’s vision and he knows he’s on the verge of passing out, which he absolutely cannot do. Not here. Not with them.

“He needs toughening up,” Bellatrix slinks into view, her dark hair let loose down her back. “He’s too soft,” she drags her finger up Regulus’s arm as she circles him, hooking her chin over his shoulder and her hands over his chest.

He’s shaking, he’s sure she can feel it. He has to—to breathe. To remember to breathe. To remember that he can. He has to keep it together even though every part of him is filled with the desire to fall apart. To slip out of his skin. It’s covered in their fingerprints. It’s barely even his.

“See, little cousin,” she hisses in his ear. He wishes she would just Crucio him again. It would hurt less. “You’re going to be king one day.”

Bellatrix is all over him, and he has to bite down on his tongue as a sob starts to make its way up his throat. It doesn’t matter, he tries to tell himself, they’re just hands. Just bodies. It doesn’t matter.

Inhale.

Exhale.

“Little King Black,” she runs a bony knuckle down his face. “So you need to be big and strong,” she’s slips easily into a baby voice. “Need to lead the family to greatness. Because if you fail I will shred you with my teeth just like I intend to do to your brother.”

And then she bites him. Teeth digging into the meat between his neck and his shoulder before pushing him away. He doesn’t make any noise, mostly because he can’t. You have to be breathing to make noise. He stumbles forward, his body too clumsy to catch itself so he ends up on his hands and knees, heaving into the dirt, trying desperately not to throw-up. Bellatrix laughs in the background.

“Go on Regulus,” she calls out, “kill the wittle wabbit. Maybe next time we’ll catch some Muggles instead.”

He doesn’t know if she’s joking. He doesn’t want to think about it. With a deep breath he gets back to his feet, not looking at any of them. It’s bright, one of the last days of summer, the Scottish countryside stretching out in front of him. His father loves this view, it’s half the reason his parents bought the house in the first place.

Regulus wipes the sweat out of his eyes on the back of his wrist before lifting his wand again.

“Avada Kedavra,” he knows better than to look away, knows they’ll only make him do it again. Find some other thing for him to kill. He’s not sure why this spell is easier. Why he can manage one but not the other.

Lucius claps him on the back, making his shoulders tense. “Good boy.”

“Someone should get the elf, I’m feeling like rabbit for dinner,” Bellatrix cackles.

Slowly, Regulus slips his wand back into the holster on his forearm, turning around and moving towards the house. He feels weak, light-headed, covered in sweat and dirt and desperate to just get the fuck away from everyone.

“Regulus!” Lucius calls out to him, but he doesn’t stop, doesn’t turn around, doesn’t look at Narcissa as he pushes past her. He just needs to make it to his room. Needs to close the door. Needs to lock it.

“Same time tomorrow—and you better be able to curse the bloody rabbits!”

He slams the backdoor shut behind him, running up the stairs to his room. His mother isn’t here right now, which is a blessing. He can feel his consciousness threatening to slip, pins and needles running up and down his legs and arms, vision blurring at the edges. He just needs to sit down. He just needs to breathe. He just needs no one to fucking touch him ever fucking again.

He very nearly cries when he gets to his room, throwing the door closed. “Colloportus,” he snaps at it, hearing the clicking of the locks.

He collapses onto his bed. Still wearing his shoes. Still covered in dirt. He needs to shower and change but right now all he can manage is lying on his side and forcing himself to breathe.

Inhale.

Exhale.

Nothing matters.

None of it matters.

It doesn’t hurt.

It doesn't hurt.

Stop crying, it doesn't hurt.

He curls in tighter. It's the fucking Crucio. It breaks him down inside, all his carefully built walls, all the ways he protects himself—shattered. It's impossible to describe, that spell. It's called the torture spell but that isn't right. When you think torture you think skin and bones and blood. But Crucio is something else, something inside you. It unstitches every part of your psyche until your mind is nothing but loose threads.

There's a hoot at the window. Regulus doesn't even bother checking whose owl it is.

"Go away," he croaks.

Owls, unfortunately, are not particularly compliant creatures. The beast hoots again, fluttering its wings as it flies from the windowsill to the headboard.

"I said go away," he grabs the pillow next to him and hurls it up at the bird who lets out an indignant squawk. A few moments pass before he hears fluttering again, the owl landing next to him on the mattress.

Rolling his eyes, Regulus pulls himself up. "Fine, give me the stupid letter then."

Holding its head high, as though deeply offended, the bird sticks out its leg so Regulus can untie the parchment.

"Well," he snaps when the bird continues to stand there expectantly. "Go on, I'm not giving you anything."

He swears the bird actually narrows its eyes, giving his hand a vicious peck before flying back out the window.

"Fuck," Regulus brings his hand to his mouth, willing to admit that he probably deserved that.

He doesn't even need to see the name to know who the letter's from. He'd recognize Evan's messy scrawl anywhere.

Reg,

Tonight. Another one. Meet at the east corner at 11:45 pm.

Evs

He rolls his eyes at the nickname. It's something stupid he started this summer. The only person who calls Evan Rosier "Evs" is Evan, but he's convinced it'll catch on. The rest of the letter is less amusing. Regulus's eyes scan over it one more time before throwing it on the floor and collapsing back onto his bed.

These nighttime excursions are another invention of the summer. Mulciber, Evan, Barty, some of the other boys, have decided they need to get Voldemort's attention. And the best way they can think to do that is by attacking Ministry employees in the dead of night. Personally, Regulus thinks it's a stupid idea that's only going to put the Ministry on high alert for no reason. But according to someone's brother's cousin's mother the Dark Lord has heard about it and voiced his approval, so now the boys are determined to get in as many attacks before the summer ends as possible.

When Regulus had voiced his negative feelings on the matter, Evan had just scoffed. "It's different for us," he'd said, "not everyone is guaranteed the Mark you know. Some of us have to work for it."

Oh yeah, Regulus had thought bitterly, because I'm just having the time of my fucking life over here.

Mostly he opts out, but he can't say no every time. It wouldn't look good. So every once and a while he tags along, throws a few punches and curses, pretends like he doesn't think it's all ridiculous.

There's a knock at his door and Regulus's whole body instantly goes stiff. He lies still for a moment before sliding his wand into his hand.

"Fuck off Lucius," he's glad to hear his voice come out flat, unshaken, pushing himself up off the bed.

"It's not Lucius," the person on the other side says eventually.

Oh.

"Narcissa?" he waves his wand and the locks click open, followed a few seconds later by his fair haired cousin.

She closes the door behind her and then just stands there, the two of them facing one another like they're about to duel. It takes a few seconds before Regulus realizes he still has his wand out and he quickly slides it back into its holster.

"Uh—do you need something?" he asks eventually, because Merlin, one of them has to say something.

That seems to wake her up. "I—no, no I just wanted to make sure you were okay. I know that things got a little..."

He blinks at her. Things got a little...intense? Is that the word she's looking for? Is that what happened? Sometimes Regulus honestly can't tell, like he's lost his barometer for acceptable behaviour. Maybe he never had one.

"Right," he says eventually, because it feels like she's waiting for an answer. "I'm...fine, thanks."

She nods, walking further into his room, looking around. He can't remember if she's ever been up here before. He likes this room better than his one at Grimmauld Place, but then, he could say that about pretty well any room in this house. There's a big bay window that lets in the sun and the moon and the stars. The wallpaper a gentle green, brighter and softer than everything in London.

He sits down on the edge of his bed, watching her walk slowly around, stopping at his desk. There isn't much there, just school books mostly. Eventually she turns back to him, leaning against it.

"Why did you think I was Lucius?"

Regulus feels his pulse start to pick up but he keeps his expression neutral. Forces his voice to come out flat, free of any hills or valleys. "Figured Bella convinced him to drag me down and finish the lesson."

He wonders if she knows, there's a look in her eyes, just in the corners...but then it's gone. She nods. It's a plausible excuse, one that works for both of them. She goes quiet again, arms crossing over her chest.

"We're trying to get pregnant," she says eventually.

She's looking at him again. Right at him.

"Oh," he can't quite parcel through all the complicated things that sentence drags up in him. Of course he knew that they would have children, honestly he's surprised they haven't already. The Malfoys, the Blacks, they need heirs. Still, the idea of Lucius having a child...a son. He feels his nails start to dig into the mattress beneath him.

"We've started to see a Healer, to figure out why it's taking so long, to see what we can do to...help things along."

"Right," Regulus fidgets uncomfortably, finding her gaze increasingly difficult to hold.

"I worry about having a baby in the middle of all of this, but..."

"Duty calls?" Regulus supplies.

She shoots him a rueful smile. "Indeed."

They lapse back into silence and Regulus finds himself wondering what the hell she's doing up here. Then has the horrible thought that maybe she's trying to test out her mothering on him.

"You two," he finds himself saying eventually, mostly in an attempt to end the uncomfortable silence, "how did that happen?"

She arches her brow, the familiar smirk tugging at her mouth, the one that is softer and kinder than her sister's. "You know how it happened, the same way it always happens."

Regulus just shakes his head. “Romance isn’t really my area of expertise.”

She laughs. “Yes, I’ve noticed.”

Oh, he thinks, great. They’ve been talking about me.

“Not that there’s much romance involved in any of this,” Narcissa goes on, dimming slightly.

“No?”

He wishes that she would stop dying her hair, he likes it better as it is naturally—light brown—it suits her. The blond is too harsh.

She gives him another half smile. “No. My mother chose him, well, and his mother chose me I suppose.”

Regulus nods, memories coming vaguely back to him. “I remember—weren’t you dating someone else?”

Her eyes flicker, but her expression remains in place. “Matthew,” she says the name softly, with reverence. It hangs between them, big with all she doesn’t say, all Regulus doesn’t need her to. He knows what it’s like, to hold onto a name like it’s the hand pulling out of the deep. The only thing keeping you from going under.

“Your mother didn’t choose him then?”

She snorts, “No, well, he was a half-blood so...”

“How scandalous.”

“Indeed,” her gaze grows distant for a moment, unfocused, no doubt disappearing to somewhere else. “We all have our childish indiscretions. Things we have to give up.”

Regulus very forcibly keeps his thoughts from wandering to where, of course, they want to go. To that smile, that laugh, those hands that seem to be the only ones that don’t pull him apart.

“Except your sister—Andromeda—right? She kept her...childish indiscretion?”

Narcissa’s eyes instantly grow sharp. “I’d leave that alone if I were you Reg.”

Right. Of course.

“Sure Cissy.”

“She’s not some hero, not someone worth anything but your pity.” Regulus has the feeling Narcissa has said those words a few times before, mostly to herself.

“Like Sirius.”

“Exactly.”

“Except...are we?”

Narcissa’s brow furrows. “What do you mean?”

“Are we worth anything but pity?”

She stares back at him, eyes wide, betraying all that doubt. All that pain. All that love. Regulus knows how that feels. Knows it exactly.

“Why did you come up here Narcissa?” he asks eventually.

“Why did you think I was Lucius.”

Ah.

So she does know.

He swallows the embarrassment. The fear. The disappointment—he’d really thought, if there was anyone here who would have helped him—

“We all have our childish indiscretions, right?” he says coldly.

He sees that land and then quickly watches her eyes shutter, watches her expression close down completely.

She gives him a sharp nod. “Right. Well, I’ll let you rest.”

She starts towards the door but for some reason Regulus can’t quite let it go.

“You’re still going to do it then—still going to let that man near a child?”

She pauses, hand on the doorframe. “Don’t be dramatic Regulus,” and she sounds so much like his mother that he can’t help but wince. “You’re hardly a child. And Lucius would never do anything to compromise his heir.”

Compromise. That word hits him somewhere deep. He nearly doubles over. Is that what I am? He wonders. Compromised?

“Well, as long as you’re sure,” he somehow manages to get out.

“I won’t let anything happen to my child.”

“Do you think all mothers say that?” his voice is cold enough that it drags her gaze back over her shoulder. “How many of them end up being liars, I wonder.”

Surprisingly, she doesn’t answer.

When he goes down to his father’s room the next morning he isn’t there. Regulus sighs, rubbing a hand across his face.

“Crazy loon,” he mutters grumpily, moving quickly down the stairs and out into the garden.

They have a garden at Grimmauld Place too, but it’s narrow and overcrowded and the wards don’t let you get far. Here they’re surrounded by nothing for miles—just wide open space. Right at the back of the house there are intricately woven flowerbeds and stone paths, the type of thing you’d expect from a palace or Victorian mansion. His father did it all before he got sick.

“Papa,” he says, finding his father staring at a bush of purple hyacinth. “How many times do I have to tell you, you can’t just go wandering off.”

“You make me sound like a mischievous puppy,” Orion’s long hair is pulled back in a bun, the streaks of grey standing out more starkly in the morning sun. He pulls out his wand and waves it at the flowers, sending the dead blossoms tumbling to the ground.

“PAPA!” Regulus makes a grab for the wand, ripping it out of his hand. “Jesus, what the hell are you doing?”

Orion rolls his eyes. “Mon chou, c’est juste un peu de magie.”

“No magic,” Regulus says sternly. “You’re not supposed to be doing any magic. Especially not for something as stupid as this,” he gestures dismissively at the bush bringing a frown to his father’s face.

“My garden is not stupid.”

Now it’s Regulus’s turn to roll his eyes. “That’s not what I meant.”

“Non?” his father asks, eyebrow arched.

“You know I love your garden.”

Orion smiles, “Did you see the vegetable patch, those tomatoes are looking bon, no?”

Regulus tries and fails to hold back his own smile. “Yes, I saw them, very impressive.”

Orion preens. “Bien, alors, we can both agree this is not a waste of magic then,” he holds out his hand to Regulus, looking at him expectantly.

“We can hire gardeners, or we can ask Kreacher to do it—“

His father lets out a dry laugh. “Kreacher wouldn’t know the difference between a Peony and a Ranunculus if they were right in front of him, and you know how your mother feels about strangers.”

I don’t know, Regulus almost says, there seem to be more than a few strangers running through this house recently. Though it’s not as bad as it was at Grimmauld, before they’d left that place had felt like King’s Cross. People in and out, with nervous eyes and heavy cloaks.

“Then let me do it,” Regulus says exasperated, still not relinquishing his father’s wand.

“I am not an invalid Regulus.”

“You are actually.”

That makes his father laugh, he always sounds like Sirius when he laughs—or maybe it’s Sirius that sounds like him—both of them bark like dogs.

“You might be right,” his father wipes a hand across his forehead, catching beads of sweat. “But surely I can still be allowed to have a little fun, huh?” It’s not really that hot, the sun is bright and there are no clouds in the sky, but still, he shouldn’t be sweating.

“Are you running a fever?” Regulus asks, stepping forward to feel his father’s face.

“Mon coeur—arrête, arrête—I’m fine, stop fussing,” he bats Regulus’s hand away, taking a step back.

“You can’t act like this,” Regulus sighs, frustrated. “I’m not always here to—you have to take care of yourself,” those last words come out pleadingly, and he sees the softening in his father’s eyes.

“Regulus,” he says, in that way parents do when they’re about to break your heart. Regulus knows the tone well. “I’m dying.”

“We’re all dying,” he says flatly, hand curling too tightly around the wand in his hand. In the distance he can hear birds chirping.

His father smiles. “Yes, well, I am dying a little bit quicker than the rest of you.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Regulus—“

“Stop saying my name like that,” he snaps.

His father quirks his brow. “Like what?”

“Like I’m a child.”

“Ah,” and then, opening his palms, “I’m afraid to me you always will be.”

Then why are you never there when I need you?

He knows it’s a stupid thought to have, that his father is sick, that he’s too weak to do anything and Regulus would never want him to hurt himself trying. That you can’t expect other people to fight for you—to protect you. That’s always been Regulus’s problem. He’s always needed a hero.

“Papa, please,” he says finally.

His father gives him a sad smile before reaching out—this time not for his wand—he pulls Regulus into him and Reg goes willingly. Even though the feeling of being held makes his skin crawl.

“There are things that can’t be changed mon coeur, things we just have to accept.”

He thinks about Narcissa. About himself. Forget Toujours Pur, the Black family motto ought to be “just accept it.”

“I want you to know,” his father says after a moment, pulling back as he brings his hands to gently hold Regulus’s face. “That I’m so proud of you. I know how hard its been, since your brother left, all the pressure you’ve had placed on your shoulders. But you’ve handled it so beautifully Regulus.”

He looks up at his father, eyes searching, wondering if he knows—knows about all of it. About what happens in this garden when he’s up in his room and the others come over. Wonders if that’s what he’s proud of?

Before he can stop himself his eyes go to the mark on his father’s forearm. It’s new, the ink still jet black, standing out starkly against his skin. His father drops his hands to Regulus’s shoulders and squeezes.

“You’re going to be brilliant Regulus, you needn’t worry,” Regulus looks up and knows that his father has caught him staring. “This is your birth right. It’s in your blood.”

What is? he doesn’t ask, which part? Because none of it ever seems to come naturally to him. But then, nothing ever seems to come naturally to Regulus, not like it does to Sirius.

Eventually, his father smiles.

“Lets make a deal, huh? I’ll promise to sit here like a good little boy and do no magic, if you go get your broom and let me watch you fly, yes?”

“I don’t know why you like watching me fly so much, it’s always the same.”

He reluctantly hands his father back his wand, the older man nodding his thanks as he slips the slender stick into the pocket of his robes.

“That is because you have never had the pleasure of seeing yourself fly,” his father’s eyes sparkle. “It is like listening to a symphony.”

Regulus rolls his eyes. “Yes, ok, I’m getting my broom, no more comparing me to symphonies please.”

His father laughs, “I only tell you the truth mon coeur.”

Regulus waves him off as he heads towards the shed.

My heart, that’s what his father calls him. My heart. Don’t put your faith in me, he wants to tell him. I’m not the son worth betting on.

“Really Regulus?”

He blinks up at Lucius, on his back again, sun in his eyes. The older man offers Regulus his hand but he doesn't take it, pushing himself onto his knees and then, eventually, to his feet. They've limited Bellatrix to strictly forgivable curses today.

He hears Lucius huff out a laugh behind him. “Suit yourself.”

“This is starting to get pathetic little Black,” Rodolphus pushes himself off the back wall. “What good are you if you can't even stomach this, huh?” he gestures at the cat they've trapped.

Why'd it have to be a cat, Reg thinks dully. I like cats. Why couldn't it be a rat or a snake or possum. As if hearing his thoughts the animal lets out a mournful meow.

“Oi, back off of him,” Narcissa steps in, though Regulus honestly couldn't tell you why. “He can brew more potions than you can name, and he's managed everything else you've thrown at him.”

That's not technically true. He couldn't manage the Patronus.

Rodolphus turns his skin-crawling leer on her. “Yes, he's a pretty little swot. But none of that matters if he chokes when he needs to actually point his wand at someone.”

Mostly, Regulus doesn't let himself think about what they're practicing for. He doesn't let himself think about most of what's happened this summer. Easier that way. To just...let it go.

“He won't choke.”

Even in the August heat, his mother's voice still sends a chill down his spine. They all turn towards the house where Walburga stands inside the door. Dressed in black, eyes intently focused on her son.

“Will you Regulus?”

It feels like everything has suddenly gone still—the wind, the tree branches, the birds overhead. Nothing moves. Nothings breathes. Nothing makes a sound.

“No maman,” he forces the words out.

She gives him a sharp nod, taking a step forward, arms crossing over her chest. “Go on then, show them.”

Fuck.

His hand is sweaty as he adjusts his grip on his wand, turning back to the cat, feeling each and ever set of eyes on him. Bellatrix is frightening in her absolute disregard for everything

and everyone, but his mother is scary in another way. The way that her hatred can zero in and focus itself on just you.

He swallows, trying to put everything away in boxes and shove it all down. To not think about the cat as a cat. Or an animal. Or a living being. But an “it.” Just an “it.”

The first time he ever saw someone Crucio’d it was Sirius. The summer before he ran away. Regulus had felt many things about his mother before that point—anger, fear, love—but that day, that was the first day he had really hated her.

“Regulus,” his name comes out of her mouth as a warning.

He exhales, pulling on that memory, on that hatred, letting every horrible feeling fill him up.

It’s for his own good, his mother had said, staring at her eldest son while he writhed on the floor in agony.

For his own good.

“Crucio.”

It’s work not to be sick. Not to drop his wand. He wonders if this is what he looks like to them, if this is how they feel when they watch. Or maybe they feel nothing at all.

He waits for someone to tell him to stop but no one does, eventually he pulls back, shaking and out of breath. The noise doesn’t stop though. The cat’s screaming. He knows the feeling, the way the burn sits in your bones afterwards. In your head.

“Finally,” he hears Rodolphus mutter under his breath.

Regulus stares at some indistinct point in the distance, focusing on his breathing, on not falling to the ground. His mother begins to clap. Slow. Poignant. It doesn’t feel like celebrating.

“Excellent,” she says, waiting until Regulus’s eyes meet her’s. “He’ll be here on Sunday.”

That’s it. That’s all she says. She’s back inside the house before he can even blink.

“Aw, did someone just need their mommy?” Rodolphus says mockingly.

Regulus doesn’t bother responding, doesn’t know how. The cat is still crying in the background and honestly he feels like he might be sick. Without thinking he starts moving, Bellatrix and Rodolphus are laughing about something but he isn’t sure what, he thinks Narcissa reaches for him but he keeps going. He doesn’t make it far—just to the other side of the house—before his hands are on his knees and he’s vomiting up the entire contents of his stomach.

He falls against the wall, wiping his mouth on the back of his hand as he slides down to the ground. Sunday. She said he’d be here on Sunday. A shiver runs through Regulus. There’s no question who “he” is.

“Wow,” he looks up to see an amused Lucius leaning against the wall next to him. “You really did throw-up, I wasn’t sure if you actually would.”

Regulus gives him a flat look before dropping his head down onto his knees. “Go away,” he mumbles, not able to muster anything more threatening.

Lucius kisses his teeth. “You used to be so much more agreeable.”

Regulus laughs, because it’s such a horrible, fucked up thing to say that he’s not sure what else to do. It’s too hot. Too hot for all of this.

“Are you really this awful,” he finds himself asking, lifting his head just enough to speak. “Or is it some kind of act?”

Lucius lets out a dry chuckle. “Am I your villain Regulus?”

“No,” not even close. “But you are a fucking nightmare.”

“I can accept that.”

He wants to punch him. He doesn’t. Can’t. Hasn’t the energy, the courage. But God does he want to.

“So, how’s the boy then.”

Regulus stiffens, looking over Lucius’s shoulder, half expecting Bellatrix or his mother to appear. He doesn’t know which would be worse.

Lucius smirks, “I’ve already cast a privacy charm,” he waves his hand dismissively at the air.

Regulus does not find that at all comforting and it must show on his face because the older man rolls his eyes.

“Oh stand down, I’m not about to do anything out here am I?”

This, Regulus thinks, this right here is why I’m so fucked up. That he can talk about it like—like it’s nothing. Normal. Casual. Like it hasn’t left holes in my skin.

“There’s no boy,” he says flatly. And then, for good measure; “Go away.”

Lucius snorts. “Nah, I don’t buy it. Big attitude change like this? Must be a boy. Could be a girl but, I don’t expect you’re quite lucky enough to swing both ways.”

Regulus doesn’t say anything, nails digging into his knees. Apparently Lucius takes this as an invitation to keep talking because he steps forward and crouches down next to him.

“He’s not one of ours I’d bet, that’s why you’ve been so...resistant lately,” he laughs dryly. “I’m surprised it’s lasted this long, though I can’t imagine it’ll go on much longer, not once you have the mark. Those lot are too self-righteous to let something like that slide. Hypocrites.”

“Hypocrites?” Regulus doesn’t know why he asks.

Lucius shrugs. “They’re fighting for their power like I’m fighting for mine, don’t see where they get off feeling so damn morally righteous.”

Regulus isn’t even sure where to start with that.

“Your power? Or the Dark Lord’s?” is what makes it out of his mouth.

Lucius rolls his eyes. “Oh, like they’re not fighting for Dumbledore? One mad old man is no better than the next.”

Regulus isn’t sure if that’s true. Though he, personally, has never much cared for Dumbledore. Something about the way his smile doesn’t reach his eyes.

Still, when he speaks it’s only to say; “Last I checked, Dumbledore isn’t branding his followers.”

“Oh come now Regulus,” Lucius pulls back his sleeve, the snake on his arm squirming in the sunlight. “Surely you’re not afraid of a little ink?”

Regulus looks down at it and then away. “I’m not scared,” he says wearily, and he means it. He isn’t. “I’m just so fucking tired of not having any control.” It’s proof of how lonely he’s been that he’s having this conversation with Lucius Malfoy at all.

The older man leans in close and Regulus tries and fails not to flinch. “What do you think we’re fighting for?” he lingers there for a moment before pulling away. “We have the power, they want the power, we crush them, we reign supreme again. It’s really all very simple.”

“I don’t want power.”

He doesn’t have to look at Lucius to know he’s rolling his eyes. “Power, control, it’s all the same.”

Regulus’s head leans back against the wall, looking up at the dimming sky. “I don’t think that’s how they see it—this fight—I don’t think they see it as being about power.”

“Well then they’re idiots, everything is about power. You think Dumbledore aligned himself with the Mudbloods out of the goodness of his heart? Please, he saw an opportunity and he took it.”

Regulus doesn’t answer, closing his eyes and trying to will his exhausted body to stand. Hopefully they can stop these lessons, he’s managed all three unforgivables, surely they can leave him alone now?

“You think you’ll get control on the other side?”

Again, Regulus doesn’t answer. He knows a trap when he hears one.

“Dumbledore will turn you into his little creature, have you do all his spying for him, and then toss you aside. I bet you a thousand galleons that’s what’ll happen to your brother. At least with us you have value, have something that can’t be taken from you—blood.”

In Regulus’s personal opinion, his blood has never done very much for him. But he doesn’t bother voicing that thought either. Eventually, he hears the sound of Lucius getting to his feet.

“You know,” he says, because he can’t ever seem to shut-up. “I’d be careful if I were you, wouldn’t want Bellatrix to find out about your little boy-toy.”

Regulus’s eyes fly open as his head snaps towards Lucius.

“Is that a threat?” he finds himself asking.

Lucius clutches dramatically at his chest. “Regulus, you wound me. It’s merely some helpful advice. Because if she finds out what you’ve been doing and, God forbid, with whom, that poor boy is going to find himself dismembered.”

Despite his best efforts to stay calm, Regulus can feel his heart racing in his chest. “I told you, there’s no boy.”

Lucius laughs. “Sure, sure. Tell me, how good are you at Occlumency, again? Cause I reckon she could crack you open after a few rounds of Crucio.”

Fuck.

“Lucius—“

“Oh listen to that, do you hear it? You’ve gone all soft, and after being so rude to me.”

Regulus grits teeth, trying to keep some semblance of control. “Please.”

The older man smiles. “I do love hearing that word out of your mouth.” He walks forward and Regulus has to force himself to stay still—to not pull his wand out or run. Especially when Lucius reaches out to run a hand through his curls.

“You know,” he says, hand sliding down Regulus’s jaw, thumb running over his lower lip. The fear and anxiety building inside him are almost unbearable—there are no words to describe this feeling. Like he’s going to burst open. Spill out of his skin. “You’re so much prettier when you’re quiet.”

He doesn’t breathe again until Lucius steps back. Sharp and desperate. Lucius must notice because he laughs.

“You see Regulus? Everything is about power.”

There are dots in Regulus’s vision, memories of hands and weight and muffled sobs clawing at his throat.

It takes him a long time to realize that Lucius is gone.

He manages to make it into town on Saturday. He goes once a week. To get away. To visit the gallery. To think about all the things he's not supposed to think about. To read James's letters.

He sits on a park bench, fingers running over the envelopes in his hands. He always brings them all with him. Afraid to leave them behind. Desperate to read them again. There's only one left unopened, the rest of them scarred with creases and smudge marks from all the times he's pulled them out, all the times he's told himself "just once more."

He slides his finger under the sealed envelope, pulling out the fresh pages and getting the same fluttering in his stomach as he does every time. It's the kind of feeling that makes him do stupid things like try and send letters through the Muggle post. He unfolds the pages.

Dude,

Regulus groans out loud, causing the old woman on the bench across from him to jump. "Sorry" he mouths at her, but honestly, dude? Dude, James? Somehow he manages to keep reading.

We did it! We're almost there. Two more days and we'll be back! Full disclosure, I am probably going to be a little much, I can already feel it. I'm going to miss you like crazy Reg. I always miss you.

So listen, this is what I've been thinking about today—you and me, in the pros. It's basically guaranteed to happen so it's barely even a daydream. Does that sound obnoxious? Whatever. It's true. I can't decide which I like better, us on the same team—because honestly, we'd be unstoppable. Or us on opposing teams, because baby, that sexual tension? Killer. Either way, we'd be such a power couple. They'd make like posters and shit with our faces on them.

"Oh my God James," Regulus mutters, smiling despite himself.

We could put them up in our house (yes, we have a house, we're international Quidditch stars so it's probably like a super amazing house too). We'd both make it on the national team, obviously, and go off and win the Quidditch World Cup for England. Then retire at thirty-five and fuck off to a beach somewhere. I'm telling you Reg, the two of us, together, we'll conquer the world.

Regulus feels his heart squeeze too tight.

See, these are the things I think about. Sometimes I wonder if you know, if you think maybe this is just me messing around or something. But it isn't. When I think about my future I think about you. Us. It feels right Reg, I don't know how to make you see that. I know it's not right, right now. But it will be. We can get there. We can get anywhere.

Anyway, I'll be waiting for you in two days, in our room. Even if it's too much, if you can't come, it's alright. I just want you to know that I'll be there if you need me. I'll always be there.

Love you,
James

He hates him. Hates him. Hates him. He blinks the tears out of his eyes while thinking about how much he hates James Potter. It feels like this every time. Like breaking his own heart. But then, he supposes that's what this whole thing has been. Seeing the pain and heading straight for it. Pretending he can be someone else. Someone better. Someone who deserves to be loved the way James loves.

He snuffles, re-reading the letter just to torture himself. Just to hear it again. He's never thought about his future, never been able to picture it. But the image James paints is beautiful—not the Quidditch or the fame but the two of them. Together. Living in a house. "Our house" James had called it.

It was selfish of Regulus to let this happen. To let it go on. To let James get sucked in. Selfish and dangerous. Because Lucius is right. If they find out—his mother, Bella—they'll kill James. Horribly, painfully, slowly. For the dishonour, for the shame of it, they'll make it their personal fucking mission. Taking in Sirius was bad enough, but this?

So we're agreed, says the voice in his head, we stop this now. We end it. We keep him safe.

And it sounds good. It sounds right. The right thing to do. But it's immediately followed by another voice. Weak and whinny.

I can't. I can't. I can't.

You can.

I need him.

Enough to risk his life? Because if he's dead you can't have him anyway.

"Fuck," Regulus hisses, pressing the heels of his hands into his eyes. He's been having the same conversation with himself all summer. Round and round in circles it goes. Of course, that was before Lucius explicitly threatened him. Before he knew for sure that he was getting the mark.

You could refuse.

Yeah, that'll go over well.

What's the worst they can do?

Kill me.

Would that be so bad?

No, probably not, but he doesn't think he'll do it anyway. Dying takes courage. The brave and the bold die, the cowardly survive.

So we run away.

Where?

To James's?

No. His mother could afford to lose one son, after all, she had a spare. And Sirius had always been too much trouble. But both? Walburga would kill everyone in that fucking house before she let Regulus go.

You have to end it. You have to keep him safe.

I can't. I can't. I can't.

Regulus sighs, slipping James's letter back into its envelope and getting to his feet. It's a short walk to the gallery from here, and the sun has finally been dimmed by the clouds and the encroaching fall. So he starts moving, hands in his pockets, thoughts still running in circles.

I can't. I can't. I can't.

It's busy today, the gallery. It's a Saturday and with the weather Regulus supposes it's to be expected. There's no entrance fee but they do take donations, so Regulus always makes sure to bring Muggle money to slip into the little plastic box by the entrance.

Hands in his pockets he wanders through the big rooms, with their towering ceilings and beautiful paintings. He pretends to meander. To be purposeless. With no destination. All the while moving very consciously in the direction of the one painting he wants desperately to see. The one he always wants to see.

He can never remember why he fell in love with it in the first place. Just that after he saw it he couldn't look away. Couldn't stop coming back, wondering what had happened, wondering who they were. Eventually, he'd asked one of the tour guides. She'd said a lot of things that he hadn't understood. Words he'd never heard—people, places—so he'd asked her to write it down. Then he'd gone to the Muggle library.

"I love this one."

He blinks, looking beside him to see a lanky girl, in mustard yellow bellbottoms and long, dark braids.

"Sorry," is the only word he seems to think of. He's not sure if he means it as a question or a statement.

"You know what I think it is?" he hears an irritating smacking noise and realizes she's chewing gum.

"Are you allowed gum in here?"

She looks over at him for the first time, smiling. “Why, you going to tell on me pretty boy?”

He honestly has no idea what’s going on right now. “Uh...no,” he manages eventually.

She nods, satisfied, before turning back to the painting. “See, the thing is, you think the tragedy is Patroclus but it isn’t.”

Regulus finds himself looking at the painting too. The pale figure in Achilles’s arms, the crowd of mourners around him.

“I mean look at his face right? Totally peaceful.”

“He’s dead,” Regulus says dumbly.

She rolls her eyes. “Yes, but that’s the point isn’t it?”

Which could mean so many things that Regulus isn’t sure where to go with it.

“The real tragedy, is Achilles,” she goes on eventually, pointing at the pained face in the centre. “The people who get left behind, that’s what hurts the most, that’s what makes this painting so good.”

Regulus lets his eyes drag between the two faces, the two men, who had loved so fiercely, who had made it so far.

“That isn’t the tragedy,” he says finally, bringing her dark eyes back to him.

“No?” she pops her gum.

He shakes his head. “The tragedy is that Achilles could have stopped it. Instead he lets Patroclus die because he isn’t brave enough to face his own fate. The fate he chose when he sailed for Troy. The fate he tries to use Agamemnon to chicken out of at the last minute. Achilles is the death of Patroclus, not Hector. That’s the tragedy ”

“Agamemnon sucked though, and besides, Achilles was defending his honour.”

Regulus is silent for a moment, staring at the broken figures in front of him. “If he’d actually loved him, he would have put the armour on himself.”

He can feel her watching him. “You are a very intense guy.”

He looks back at her. “And you’re very blunt.”

“True,” holding out her hand. “I’m Marybeth.”

At first he’s not sure what she’s doing but then his brain wakes up. “Oh—ah—Regulus.” They shake.

“Regulus?” she arches her brow. “That’s a wicked name.”

“Thanks, Marybeth is also...nice?”

She snorts. “Very convincing.”

“Sorry, I’m not good at...”

“Compliments?”

“People.”

“Ah,” she nods wisely. “Well, your taste in art definitely doesn’t scream ‘fun and approachable’ that’s for sure.”

Regulus smiles a little, despite himself.

“I see you here a lot,” she goes on eventually.

When Regulus raises his brow she explains. “My mum works here, so, I end up spending a lot of time here too.”

“Ah, I guess that...makes sense,” Regulus, once again, finds himself with no idea what else to say—how to carry on a basic conversation. No one’s ever talked to him here before.

“This is the part where you explain why you’re here so much,” her mouth twitches, like she’s trying not to smile.

Regulus just blinks back at her. “Uh,” before looking at the painting in front of them.

“Really?” she asks. “Just this one painting? Just cause you...?”

“Like it?” Regulus answers uncertainly. He honestly hasn’t got a better reason for her.

She laughs, it’s a pretty noise. “Fair enough I guess,” there’s another pause, both of them staring forward. “Well,” she goes on eventually, “I just thought I’d introduce myself, put in my two-cents about your little obsession,” she nods towards the painting. “It was nice to meet you Regulus,” there’s a look in her eyes—like she’s smiling without using her mouth. Flirting, his brain supplies. She’s flirting with you.

“Maybe I’ll see you around huh?” she says while walking away backwards. “Convince you to look at something else for a change,” she winks, before turning around and continue on her way.

He stares after her, thinking about how she has no idea what’s happening in the wizarding world. No idea what’s coming. That he could kill her with the flick of his wand and at this point probably wouldn’t even get in trouble for it—the Death Eaters have the Ministry under such tight control. He thinks about the person Marybeth must think that he is, to look at him like that, to wink at him. How nice it would be to be that boy.

He exhales, shoving his hands in his pockets and turning away, heading for the exit.

Marybeth never does see him again.

He's seen Voldemort before. Not up close. But he has seen him. It was at Grimmauld Place, his mother had offered it up for some meeting. Regulus had waited on the stairs, just to see—see who everyone kept whispering about. The man who had the wizarding world in such an uproar.

Truthfully, he'd been a little disappointed. Voldemort was just a man, middle-aged, tall, with almost translucently pale skin, exaggerated by his dark hair and dark eyes. He couldn't see anything particularly frightening about him. Or inspiring. He just...was.

And then his gaze had found Regulus on the landing. Regulus had wondered, at the time, if it was a spell, silent, wandless, but a spell. Because the cold feeling that had rushed along his bones then had been so startling he'd nearly fallen down the stairs.

He knew now, standing in front of Voldemort properly, that it hadn't been. They say that the eyes are the windows to the soul. Well, Regulus doesn't know what it is he's looking into, but it doesn't feel like a soul. Doesn't feel alive at all.

They're in the dining room, it's smaller than the one at Grimmauld Place, homier, making this all feel that much more absurd. That much harder to believe. It's dark out, the floating candles above the table the only light in the room, illuminating the masked faces that line the walls. Lucius is here, so are Bella and Rodolphus, his mother and father. And others. Some people he's known his whole life, some people he's never met before. Not that he can tell them apart now.

Voldemort stands at the head of the table, in dark robes, Regulus in front of him, several inches shorter and feeling like a child. The man smiles, it's not a pleasant expression.

"Regulus Arcturus Black," his voice is higher than Regulus expected it to be, the sound causing the hair to stand up on the back of his neck. Voldemort's head twitches to the side. Like a snake, sizing up its prey. Regulus is used to it. He's been looked at like that before.

"My Lord," the words feel like they've come from someone else's mouth.

"Your family has been a great source of support for me during these long years. It is their wish for you to receive this honour, to join us here, and out of my gratitude to them I have agreed. But I need you to understand what it means, to bare my mark, to bind your life to mine," he shakes his sleeve back, showing his own mark.

"We will become one, you and I, you will feel me when I need you, when I call, when I am strong, when I am weak. This is not empty symbolism. It connects us," another smile—this man is all teeth. Regulus takes it back, not like a snake. Like a wolf. "We are a family."

There is a quiet rumbling of agreement around the room.

“You are young,” he lets his sleeve drop back down over his forearm, “so I will give you the mercy of reconsidering, if you do not feel you can give yourself to me as you must, as this demands. As your parents have.”

His dark eyes take hold of Regulus and keep him still. Unable to move. To think. To see anything but him.

“You have a choice,” like two empty pits in his face, dark and swelling, and pulling Regulus under. Drowning him. “Will you choose us?”

Achilles should have put the armour on himself.

You’re Beautiful.

He should have accepted that some things can’t be changed, some endings can’t be rewritten.

Okay Reg. Yeah, I’m yours. You’re mine too.

He should have fallen on his sword before he let Patroclus go out there. Knowing how dangerous it was. Knowing what could happen.

I love you.

Say it again.

He told James, told him ages ago that he wasn’t a very good person. Told him over and over again. That he wouldn’t be able to do the right thing. To stop this. To end this. He still can’t.

I love you Regulus.

He never should have been with James in the first place, and not even because of his family, because of the politics, but because of who Regulus is; mangled, and damaged, and compromised. Maybe if it had happened earlier, if he had known James before—before he let his family twist him up.

I just want you to know that I’ll be there if you need me. I’ll always be there.

Regulus had let himself pretend that things could be different. But he won’t do that anymore. This is who he is, this is who he was always going to be, and he won’t get James killed trying to fight fate. He’ll only lose. They always lose.

He swallows, eyes still holding Voldemort’s stare, unwavering.

“I choose you.”

Hello beautiful people!

Believe it or not the next chapter is actually going to be pretty fluffy SO there's that to hold onto.

Thank you for all the comments! I honestly would respond to them all but I always worry that that would get annoying for some reason? BUT I see you, I appreciate you, you make this very fun :)

Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

TW: Referenced Sexual Assault

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It's too hot for the jumper he's wearing. He keeps pulling at it, fabric itchy against his sweaty skin, making it impossible to ignore. He'd take it off but he needs something with sleeves. There's already an annoying voice in his head saying it's not enough, that somehow people will know. That his sleeve will ride up. That it'll bleed through the fabric. Slither down his arm.

"Blimey you look miserable," Evan is leaning against the pillar next to him, waiting for the train to arrive. He's got a bag of candied popcorn in his hands that he insists on eating by throwing pieces in the air and catching them with his mouth. He keeps looking over at the group of fourth year girls to the left of them to see if they're watching—they are not.

"I thought that was my role," Regulus says dryly, eyes lazily scanning the platform. "I'm the miserable one, you're the optimist."

"What does that make Barty?"

"You figure out what Barty is you let me know."

Evan laughs. His laugh is all nose—it makes him sound like a perpetual twelve year old.

"Honestly, I can't believe you came back. If I were you I'd be so fucking out of here."

His mother had tried to stop him, but eventually he'd managed to convince her that there was still some value in his education, even if it was just because it kept him closer to Dumbledore. Behind enemy lines, collecting information, etcetera, etcetera.

"Surprisingly enough," he says eventually. "I do like being educated."

Evan snorts. "That's why you're so miserable."

Regulus can't help the smirk that pulls at his mouth. "Probably."

"I'm telling you Reg, the less you know the better life is."

"Ah, the Evan Rosier life motto. When in doubt, be a fucking idiot."

They both laugh now, catching the attention of the aforementioned fourth year girls. Regulus imagines it's because of the noise and not some suddenly materializing desire, but Evan appears to be of a different opinion.

"Hey, hold this will you?" he smacks his popcorn into the middle of Regulus's chest.

"Merlin Evan, leave it."

But it's no use, his friend is already walking away, an overly exaggerated swagger in his step. Regulus rolls his eyes, leaning back against the pillar and glaring down at the popcorn in his hands. It's an unappealing blue colour that Regulus can't quite believe is edible.

His arm twinges. He's pretty sure it's just in his head. Or at least that's what he tells himself. Just like he tells himself that nothing is trapped under his skin. Nothing is squirming below the surface. Trying to get out. However much it might feel like it. He curls and flexes his fingers like that will help. Trying to think about something else.

"Hey."

The word is soft and quiet and still makes Regulus jump. Still makes him drop Evan's disgusting popcorn on the floor. Still makes his pulse race.

He turns around to find James behind him, sheepish smile on his face, eyes bright. Don't look at me like that, Regulus wants to tell him, you don't know what I've done.

He opens his mouth but no sound comes out. He'd meant to be more prepared than this, meant to wrap himself in an armour of apathy and distain. He hadn't expected James to just walk up to him and—but of course, he should have. It's so like him.

He's been quiet for too long and he can see the worry start to crease James's brow. He should let it. He should turn around and walk away. He's usually better at this. At being an asshole.

"Where are they?" he asks instead.

James doesn't seem to need clarification to know he's talking about the other Marauders, gesturing over his shoulder. "Just there, I can't stay long, but, I saw you and I just..." There's that smile again, and Regulus wonders if it's too late to cut off his arm. Not that it would make a difference.

"I—"

"What the hell Reg? I told you to hold my popcorn not feed it to the bloody birds."

Regulus very briefly closes his eyes.

Fuck.

James has already gone stiff, Evan coming to an abrupt stop as he realizes who Regulus is talking to. There's a moment of surprise before an unsettling smile stretches across his face.

“Well look who it is. You just can’t leave my mate here alone can you?”

“Drop it Evan,” Regulus tries to nudge him away but he isn’t having it, staring at James like someone’s just told him it’s Christmas morning—which can’t be good.

“Are you referring to the time I kicked your ass?” James asks, cocky smile spreading across his face and doing unhelpful things to Regulus’s chest. “Because that’s one of my fondest memories.”

Evan’s eyes go sharp. “How’s your dad Potter?”

The change is so quick it’s almost frightening. The mocking humour drains from James’s face, replaced by an anger that burns and Regulus can’t help feeling like he’s missed something.

“Cause the last time I saw him,” Evan goes on, having absolutely no self-preservation instinct to speak of, “he was in a right state. Could barely walk.”

And then several things click into place. Like the fact that Evan-just-be-a-fucking-idiot-Rosier spent his summer attacking Ministry employees. And that Fleamont Potter is, in fact, a Ministry employee.

“I’m going to destroy you,” James growls.

“Lets hope you throw a better punch than your dad yeah?”

Things move quickly then.

Both James and Evan step forward, Regulus moving between them, one arm wrapping around Evan’s chest and hauling him backwards, bracing for the impact of James’s fist which had already been pulled back. It doesn’t come though. What does come is the sound of a new voice.

“Woah, woah mate, hold on,” Sirius says behind him.

“You piece of shit,” James shouts. “You spineless pathetic fucking wanker.”

“Come and get me Potter! Come and get me and we’ll see if you cry just like your daddy!” Evan shouts over Regulus’s shoulder.

Regulus slams him against the pillar behind them, able to turn just enough to see Sirius in a similar position with James. Their eyes meet.

“Reg,” he says by way of greeting, voice slightly laboured as he continues to struggle with his best mate.

“Sirius.”

“We really have to stop meeting like this.”

Regulus lets out a breath of laughter before shoving Evan back again as he makes another attempt to break free.

“I’ll have my people call your people,” he says dryly.

“You know people?” Sirius huffs. “I’m shocked.”

It almost feels natural, this back and forth. And for a minute Regulus can pretend—that they’re on the same side. That they don’t hate each other.

That is, until Evan’s hand grabs hold of his left arm and everything goes white. Pain searing through him as he drops to his hands and knees.

That definitely wasn’t in his head.

“Fuck,” is the first thing he hears once the pounding in his ears clears. “Fuck Reg, I’m sorry.”

Regulus’s skin is burning hot, covered in sweat. He tries to breathe through it. It’s not the worst pain he’s ever felt, it just caught him off guard.

It will fade, his father had said to him before he left. He’d been holding Regulus’s arm out in front of him, running a gentle hand over the fresh mark. Regulus hadn’t known if it was the ink or the pain his father was talking about.

“What the fuck did you do to him?”

That’s James. Regulus opens his eyes, not realizing he’d closed them in the first place.

“Reg?”

He looks over to see Evan crouched beside him, ignoring James completely.

Regulus shakes his head. “I’m fine,” he croaks. “It’s fine.”

“Something happen to your arm Reg?” Sirius asks, the cold edge in his voice sending fear dripping down Regulus’s spine. Of course Sirius would notice.

He makes sure to keep his expression neutral when he turns back to his brother. “Just Evan’s claw like nails. You’re lucky he didn’t get a shot at your face Potter, your fans would never have recovered.”

James looks like he can’t decide whether to be worried or pissed, eyes bouncing back and forth between Regulus and Evan. But Sirius, Sirius doesn’t take his eyes off of Regulus. Regulus can practically feel him trying to pick him apart, and he has to resist the urge to pull down on his sleeve.

“C’mon,” Sirius finally looks away, shoving James back in the direction they came from.

“Lets go Prongs, they’re not worth it.”

James resists for about a second, sending Regulus one last look before reluctantly allowing Sirius to haul him away.

“Yeah, you better—“

“Evan, shut the fuck up,” Regulus snaps, pushing himself back to his feet. Evan gapes at him.

“I can’t believe you went after Fleamont Potter,” Regulus hisses, careful to make sure no one is near enough to overhear, “do you have any idea how important he is?”

“Some idea,” Evan says defensively.

“And you just thought you’d rub it in his son’s face did you? You could be sent to Azkaban for the rest of your fucking life.”

“Says the bloke with the Dark Mark on his arm.”

Regulus freezes for a second, just a second, before shoving Evan into the pillar again. Just because it feels good. “Fine, fuck it, go ahead. In fact, while you’re at it, why don’t you just pop up to Dumbledore’s office and let him know what you’ve been up to all summer, huh?”

Evan glares at him. “Yes, alright, I get it. You’ve made your point. But it’s not as though Potter has any proof does he? Besides, everyone knows Azkaban is ours these days.”

Regulus feels something in his stomach squirm but he pushes it down. So what if the Death Eaters have control of Azkaban? Of the Ministry? He always knew this was how it was going to be. Always knew they would win. There’s no point in caring about something that’s inevitable. His eyes trail momentarily to the spot where Sirius and James disappeared and he wonders if they know—if they have any idea how lost their cause is?

“Reg?” Regulus looks up at the sound of his name, something about Evan’s expression tells him he’s said it a few times. “I really am sorry about…” he trails off but looks pointedly at Regulus left arm.

Regulus sighs. “Yeah Evan, I know,” he’s not sure why he thought he could talk any sense into Evan. He was stupid and reckless when they were kids and he’s stupid and reckless now.

Regulus exhales, pinching the bridge of his nose, feeling almost comically old. “C’mon,” he says eventually, “lets go find Barty, make sure we get a compartment together.”

Evan arches his brow. “Don’t you have to go to that swot meeting?”

Regulus groans. “Fuck. I forgot about that,” he was somewhat shocked to find a Prefect badge in his school letter this summer. He’s still not convinced it wasn’t a mistake.

Evan snorts, the noise of the approaching train in the background. “You and Snape will have a blast I’m sure.”

“We always do,” he says flatly, watching the train pull into the station, all noise and smoke.

“Oh my God mum look!”

Regulus follows the voice to a particularly tiny looking first year—eyes wide, luggage nearly the same size as her. As hard as he tries, he can’t remember being that young. I mean, he can remember being eleven, but not...not like that. Not the type to light up at the sight of a train. What he does remember, is thinking: what if it crashes? What if there aren’t enough seats for everyone? What if I get lost? Sirius slow down. Wait for me. Wait for me. Wait.

He doesn’t recognize the little girl’s mother. Not a Pureblood then.

Go back, he wants to tell her, it isn’t what you think. This world is full of wolves.

“Oi, look,” Evan elbows him, bringing his attention forward. “There’s our boy.”

Through the crowd Regulus can just pick out Barty Crouch, leaning against his trunk, ankles crossed, smug look on his dark face. And just slightly behind him, a man in Ministry robes.

“His father sent one of his lackeys again I see,” Regulus says as they move towards him.

“It’s not like our parents are here waving us off, at least his old man cares enough to send someone.”

“Yeah, but it bothers Barty more than us.”

Evan rolls his eyes. “Bloody daddy issues, so predictable. The pair of you.”

Regulus doesn’t bother arguing.

The train is moving by the time Regulus starts making his way towards the Prefect’s carriage, leaving his stuff with Evan and Barty who give him a good amount of grief for the badge now pinned to his chest. He still has no idea what Slughorn or Dumbledore were thinking giving him this thing. Maybe they want to keep a closer eye on him? Keep him out of trouble? Not that he’s ever gotten into much trouble mind you, that’s more Sirius’s area of expertise.

There’s someone standing at the door to the Prefects’ carriage when Regulus gets there. He slows down, watching her bounce up and down on her tippy-toes, peering inside. He knows her, he realizes. She’s the Greengrass girl—Cerci—his year.

“Deciding whether or not to go in?” he asks, causing her to jump and spin around.

She’s pretty—freckles and tawny skin, with the biggest eyes he’s ever seen. It all ends up making her look very deer-like.

She laughs, “Sorry, hey, hi, yeah I—“ she cuts herself off, sending him a look and lowering her voice. “I have to be honest, I don’t know what I’m doing here. I’m completely useless, I’m not sure what they expect me to do with this,” she gestures to the pin on her robes.

Regulus smiles a little, nodding to his own. "Trust me, I understand."

She exhales, "Oh thank Merlin I'm not the only one."

He stands next to her, following her gaze through the glass door, "Who's all there?" he asks, trying to make out the blurry faces.

"Everyone—I mean, no one I know, obviously. Well, no one I know-know, like, I know OF them, but I don't know about them, and they certainly don't know about me. It's a very base level of knowing, you know?"

Regulus looks over at her. "Er—sure." He can't decide if her frazzled demeanour is endearing or annoying.

"Hey," her face lights up suddenly and she smacks his arm. "I just realized—we're partners."

Regulus arches his brow. "I don't think that's how it—"

"Honestly, I'm glad it's you," she talks over him. "You're scary, don't get me wrong, but I was worried it was going to be Parkinson," she leans in, lowering her voice and cupping her hand around her mouth. "He asked me out in third year and did not take the rejection well."

Regulus snorts despite himself, he's never liked Parkinson.

"You think I'm scary?" he can't help but ask.

She nods without hesitating. "Absolutely. Terrifying. You do this whole brooding stare thing and those eyes?" she shivers. "But hey, at least you didn't ask me out in third year and then knock over my pumpkin juice and start crying when I turned you down."

Regulus actually chokes on his laughter it comes out of him so unexpectedly. "No well," he has to stop, still trying to pull himself together. "You don't need to worry about that with me, I'm not really big on dating."

"Gosh, me neither. Sounds bloody terrible doesn't it? My mates are always on me about it, but honestly? Having a boy's tongue down their throats hasn't made any of their lives any better."

Regulus has no idea what he's meant to say to that, still fighting to maintain some level of decorum. If nothing else, this girl sure can paint a vivid picture.

She opens her mouth again, Regulus isn't sure if she has an off switch, but it's another voice that cuts across the train.

"Well, this is just pathetic."

Severus Snape makes his way towards them, looking every inch the miserable son of a bitch he always does. Maybe even slightly more miserable. He runs them both up and down with great disdain.

“I mean really, you two? There used to be some pride in this house.”

Regulus just looks back at him blankly, if there is one person he has no energy for it's Severus Snape.

“I mean, apparently Salazar Slytherin was actually a bit of a hermit who mistrusted the muggle ritual of regular bathing so I'm not sure if that's true,” Cerci says, very matter of fact.

Regulus snorts. He's not sure what's funnier—the fact that Cerci has apparently memorized information about Salazar Slytherin's grooming habits, or the look on Snape's face. It really is impressive the amount of distain he's able to fit inside those beady little eyes of his.

After a stony silence Snape gestures impatiently at the door. “Go on then, surely between the two of you someone can open a door?”

Regulus rolls his eyes, sliding the door open but purposefully blocking Snape's path as he gestures for Cerci to go in first.

“After you,” he says to her, which causes a smile to spread across her face.

“Oh, thank you, wow,” she slips inside, Regulus about to follow when Snape reaches out and grabs his arm—his right one, thankfully.

It still sends shocks through him though, just different ones. Memories of Lucius hauling him off the ground, grabbing his face, his hair. It's work not to flinch, not to drop Snape's gaze. He hopes the other boy can't feel him shake.

“Is it true?” Snape asks, dark eyes narrowed.

“I don't know what you're talking about.”

Snape tightens his grip. “Don't play stupid with me Black, have you been—“

“Regulus?”

Reg looks back over his shoulder to see Cerci standing a few feet inside, eyes moving between him and Snape, brow arched in question.

“C'mon,” she says eventually, nodding at the seats behind her, “we're sitting together right, partner?”

It takes Regulus a minute to realize that she's trying to save him. He blinks, turning back to Snape who seems similarly surprised, making it easy enough for Regulus to pull himself free.

“Yeah,” he clears his throat, straightening out his robes. “Yeah, coming.”

“Regulus—“

But Reg has already turned his back on Snape, Cerci smiling as he falls into step beside her.

“Thanks,” he says softly.

She looks over at him and winks.

Regulus doesn't know the Head Boy and Girl, neither of them are from Slytherin, and both are far too perky for his liking. Far too excited about scheduling.

“Professor McGonagall has said she wants patrol teams to be more mixed this year,” the boy—blond haired and blue eyed—is smiling.

“That means that you won't just be running patrols with your housemates,” he goes on, a collective groan emanating from the carriage.

“Wow, rude,” Cerci whispers beside him. “Can't split up the dream team,” she nudges him playfully.

He arches his brow. “Dream team?”

“You're right. Too generic. I'll brainstorm some new names and get back to you.”

Despite himself, Regulus smiles.

“The pairs for the rest of the train ride have already been decided,” the Head Girl holds up a clipboard. “And the schedule for the next month will be posted in the Prefect office after the feast so make sure you stop by and write down your shifts. Missing shifts is not acceptable, okay people? Neither is being late. We plan on running a tight ship this year.” Her smile is wide enough that it's starting to feel unsettling. “Okay, so for our first train shift we have....”

Not me.

Not me.

Not me.

His arm has started aching, and all he wants to do is go back to his compartment and nap to the sound of Barty and Evan's inane chatter.

“Regulus Black and Remus Lupin,” she says brightly.

Regulus sighs, closing his eyes.

“Oh come on, it's not that bad. Remus is nice.”

He turns to Cerci, ignoring the rest of the names the Head Girl rattles off for the remaining shifts. “You're friends with Remus Lupin?”

She shrugs. “He holds a study group sometimes.”

“Of course he does.”

“Okie-dokie,” the Head Girl’s voice cuts through the carriage again. “That’s it for now, I think we have a really good group here and I’m so excited to get started. Lets have a great year everybody!” There’s a smattering of half-enthused applause. It’s work for Regulus not to roll his eyes.

Everyone starts getting to their feet and shuffling out the door. He can see Lupin up near the front of the carriage with Lily Evans. The sight of her makes something ugly in Regulus rear its head. He, like everyone else in the school, had a front row seat to James’s obsession with her. So yeah, Regulus is jealous. Which is stupid and pointless. But unfortunately, when it comes to James Potter, Regulus is plagued with a host of stupid and pointless feelings.

“I’ll see y’ah later partner,” Cerci pulls him out of his thoughts as she pats his arm, heading for the door.

“You sure do get attached quick, huh? I thought I was scary?”

“Oh you are,” she shoots over her shoulder. “But I happen to like scary.”

He watches her go with a slightly bemused look on his face, certain he has never met a person that he understood less.

Eventually, he turns around to see Evans and Lupin making their way towards him. The carriage is still a little crowded with lingering groups of friends catching up after the summer. Which is maybe how Snape doesn’t see them as he slides out of his own booth, head down, hair hanging in front of his eyes.

“Oh—“ Lupin mutters as they collide, stumbling back. It’s nothing really, not until Snape realizes who he’s run into.

“What the hell—don’t fucking touch me,” he jumps back, staring at Lupin like he’s done a lot more than just causally bump into him. Regulus’s eyes bounce between them, trying to figure out what he’s missed. But Remus just looks resigned, holding up his hands in surrender.

“You ran into me Snape.”

“You should be more careful. Fucking animal—“

“OKAY,” Evans steps between the pair of them, staring Snape down. “You can go now Severus.”

Something complicated contorts Snape’s face. “Lily—“

“Go. Now.”

Behind her Lupin has gone pale, which also, in Regulus’s opinion, seems like a bit of an overreaction.

There’s a moment where it looks like Snape might actually fight her (a bad move on his part since Regulus is fairly certain Evans could lay him out flat), but then he steps back.

“Really picking sides these days aren’t you Lily?” he says bitterly.

If he’s expecting those words to wound her he must be disappointed because Evans doesn’t even flinch. “Pot meet kettle,” she says dryly.

“I’m just saying, you should be careful who you hang around with.”

“Again, the irony of that coming from you.”

Snape rolls his eyes. “Fine, whatever. But I tried to warn you,” he gives Lupin another scathing look before turning on his heel and booking it out of the carriage

There’s a flash of something like sadness in Evan’s green eyes before she turns back to Lupin. “You alright?” she asks.

He nods slowly and then, after a second, seems to wake up, eyes refocusing.

“Lily Evans, my hero,” he smiles dryly.

She rolls her eyes. “Don’t start.”

“James would be so proud.”

“Ah yes, my mission in life, please James Potter.”

It’s irrational, he knows it is, but part of him wants to rip James’s name out of her mouth. Never let it pass her lips again.

Lupin looks like he’s going to speak but stops when his eyes find Regulus over Evan’s shoulder.

“Black,” he says, causing the red headed girl to turn around.

“Lupin.”

“Wow,” Evans has a slightly mesmerized look on her face as she runs him over. “Sorry, I just—I didn’t realize how much you looked like him until now.”

Regulus just stares at her, straight faced. “He’s taller.”

“Er—“ she shoots Lupin a look, clearly uncertain what to do with him. “I guess that’s—“

“And funnier,” Lupin supplies, nearly matching Regulus’s deadpan tone. The two boys share a pointed look before Lupin breaks it to turn to Lily. “You should go, no point hanging around here longer than you have to.”

“You’re sure you’re alright...with...everything?”

There is no doubt in Regulus’s mind that he’s included in that “everything.”

Lupin gives her a weak smile. “Yeah, I’m alright Lils,”

“M’kay, see you later?”

Remus nods as she starts towards the door.

“Regulus,” she says as she passes him.

He’s slightly thrown by the use of his first name but still manages a clipped; “Evans” before she’s out the door and beyond hearing. Leaving just him and Lupin.

He looks back at the older boy who sighs. “I’m supposed to show you the ropes.”

A beat of silence.

“Sounds thrilling,” Regulus says flatly.

Lupin gives him a dry smile. “It’s only two hours, lets just...get through it.”

Regulus nods in agreement, he hasn’t the energy to be difficult, and by the looks of it, neither does Lupin. The older boy starts moving and Regulus follows.

“So the train’s pretty straight forward,” he says as they exit the carriage. “Basically you just do laps up and down, technically you’re allowed to check the compartments but no one ever does—unless, you know, you hear someone being murdered or something.”

“You get a lot of murder attempts on the Hogwarts Express?”

Lupin snorts. “You’d be surprised.”

Regulus doubts it.

“You can dock points, but on the train that’s pretty redundant since no one has any. Also, you can’t take points from other Prefects.”

They move to the side as a group of Hufflepuffs pass them. Two of them giggle, eyes moving from Lupin’s face to the floor and back again. The third girl, apparently less shy, waves.

“Hey Remus!”

Remus smiles mildly. “Hey, good summer?”

Blush blooms across her face. “Yeah, brilliant. You?”

He shrugs. “It was alright. Can’t complain. I’ll see you around yeah?”

“Yeah!” she joins her friends in their giggling.

Regulus struggles not to roll his eyes as they continue along the carriage. “Hufflepuff outreach part of Prefect duties?”

Lupin huffs out a laugh. “Honestly, I have no idea who any of those people were. It’s a side effect of being friends with James and Sirius.” He shoots Regulus a look almost immediately

after he speaks but Regulus keeps his expression blank.

“Fans you mean?”

Lupin wrinkles his nose. “I guess.”

“I expect they’re more thrilled about that than you are.”

They keep walking, moving into the next car, passing a few more students as they go, more waving happens, though Lupin doesn’t stop to talk to any of them. Eventually he speaks again, sounding the whole time like he’s not sure if he’s supposed to.

“I don’t think James notices honestly,” he sends Regulus a sidelong look. “Sirius does though. Plays it up a bit.”

Regulus nods. “Makes sense.”

There’s an annoying tightness in his chest every time Lupin says James’s name. A pain just under his ribs. Soft and aching. He finds his hand absentmindedly rubbing his sternum. He hasn’t figured out how he’s going to do it—how he’s going to end things. What he’s going to say. He could always just show him the mark he supposes. Then there’d be no need to say anything.

After a long period of silence Lupin speaks, voice quieter this time.

“James said Rosier attacked his dad,” Regulus can feel Lupin’s eyes on him. “Is that true?”

Fucking Evan.

It’s a blessing really, that Regulus hadn’t been there that night. He’s not sure what he would have done—probably nothing. He probably would have stood back and watched. Added it to the list of things James is never going to forgive him for.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” is the answer he gives, making sure to meet Lupin’s stare when he says it, to show him the neutral expression on his face.

For a moment, he actually thinks he sees disappointment in Lupin’s eyes. But then it’s gone. “I’m sure James will believe you when you tell him that.”

Regulus grits his teeth, annoyed that the dig actually bothers him. “You think he’s gullible?”

“I think he would never lie to you, so he won’t expect you to lie to him,” there is an irritating stoic quality to Remus. Something unflappable. It makes Regulus want to poke him.

“What happened back there with Snape?” he asks, figuring that’s a good place to start. Almost instantly he feels the older boy tense.

“We’re not exactly friends,” Lupin says evasively, looking out the window beside him.

It’s work for Regulus not to smile.

Got you, he thinks.

“That was a little more than just not-friendly back there. That was fear.”

Lupin snorts. “I’m not afraid of Severus Snape.”

“No,” Regulus agrees. “But he’s afraid of you.”

He sees it again, the jolt of tension that runs through Lupin, the clenching of his jaw.

“So afraid,” Regulus goes on, “that he completely lost control in there, which he doesn’t normally do in general but specifically not in front of Evans,” still Lupin says nothing, watching the Scottish countryside roll by like it’s the most fascinating fucking thing he’s ever seen.

“He’s scared of you,” Regulus repeats. “And you feel bad about it.”

“I don’t feel bad about it,” his expression is still neutral but there’s a new tension in his voice that lets Regulus know he’s winning.

“You do. You didn’t enjoy it at all.”

“Do most people enjoy being frightening?” Lupin asks, failing to keep his voice light.

“Oh come on, if he’d acted that way around my brother Sirius would have lapped up every second of it.”

“Yes, well, some of us have a little more fucking humanity than Sirius bloody Black.”

That actually takes Regulus by surprise. The anger. And not directed at Snape.

Sirius hurt someone, that’s what James said. Someone important.

“You and my brother haven’t made up then?” he finds himself asking before he can think better of it.

Lupin’s eyes snap to him. “Did James tell you?” Regulus can’t quite figure out his expression—fear? Anger?—it’s one of those, or both. Normally he’d toy with him a bit more but he doesn’t want to make things difficult for James.

“No, not really. Just that my brother messed up, that he didn’t think he could forgive him.”

Lupin holds his stare for a moment longer before looking away again. “Well, he’s managed that last bit.”

It’s undeniable, the bitterness in his voice, and before Regulus can stop himself a dry laugh falls out of his mouth. Lupin sends him a look like he thinks he’s lost it.

“Sorry,” Regulus shakes his head. “I just didn’t expect us to have anything in common.”

“We have something in common?” Lupin sounds hesitant, like he’s afraid of what the answer might be.

“Yeah. We're jealous.”

Lupin comes to a stop near the end of the car, facing Regulus properly for the first time.

“Jealous of what?”

Regulus waves his hand indistinctly in the air. “Of the two them—James and Sirius, Sirius and James—their names have practically molded into one they’re said together so often. They...I don’t know, make sense together. You’ve see it.”

After a moment, Lupin nods.

“And you just know that nothing will ever matter to them as much as they matter to each other,” Regulus goes on, feeling the familiar barbs of jealousy that have been there since he was ten years old. “Drives me mental.”

Lupin actually laughs at that, leaning back against the wall behind him. “You know sometimes they don’t even have to speak?” he swipes a hand across his face. “They’ll just look at each other and it’s like they know. And I want that, I want S—” but he cuts himself off. And Regulus finds himself wondering what it is that Remus Lupin wants so badly he won’t say it out loud.

“I hated James for it at first,” Regulus goes on after a brief pause, “for being so close to him.”

Lupin arches his brow. “And now?”

“Now I hate them both. Bloody confusing honestly.”

Lupin gives him an earnest smile, different entirely from every way he’s looked at him before. “I know that feeling,” and then, as if worried he’s given something away, he wipes his expression clean, standing up a little straighter.

Regulus watches as a pair of Ravenclaws pass them, small and murmuring, arms linked. It always surprises him how young the other years look, when really there’s so little space between them.

“You never told James,” Lupin brings his attention back to him.

“Told him?” there are a lot of things he’s never told James, though which of them Lupin knows he hasn’t a clue.

“What I said to you in the hallway that day.”

Regulus blinks, it hadn’t really occurred to him before. “Oh. No. I didn’t.”

Lupin crosses his arms over his chest, giving him an appraising look. “I can’t figure out why,” he says eventually. “You could have used it against me.”

Regulus almost laughs. “Believe it or not, I don’t actually have anything against you.”

“I threatened to dismember you.”

Regulus shrugs. “You were protecting him. If anything I respect it.”

A slightly bemused look comes across Lupin’s face. “You would have come out looking the better for it, James would have been pissed at me.”

That’s certainly true. “It only would have upset him,” he says simply.

“Still would have been in your favour.”

“I don’t really consider James being upset as being in my favour.”

Lupin leans back, as though seeing him for the first time. “I thought...” he trails off, and then shakes his head and starts again. “I thought maybe you were just doing it to get back at Sirius.”

Oh.

“That’s fair,” he says, though his stomach has just pulled itself into a knot. “But no. Not quite.”

Lupin keeps staring at him before eventually giving up, like Regulus is a math equation he can’t parcel out.

“I don’t get it, really I don’t, but he’s mad about you,” Regulus feels that knot in his stomach pull tighter. “And, as hard as it is for me to believe, I think you might actually care about him too.”

More than breathing.

“Is this you giving us your blessing?” Regulus asks dryly, thankful that none of his feelings bleed into his voice.

Lupin laughs, “No, absolutely not. This is a terrible bloody idea, and, no offence, but I don’t like you very much.”

“The feeling is mutual.”

Lupin bows his head, accepting this. “I’m just saying—“ he seems to fight with the words in his mouth. “I’m just saying, I am mildly less opposed to it than I was before.”

Regulus wants to tell him not to worry.

That he’ll do the right thing.

For once.

That he'll put an end to this, before he hurts James too much. Before he breaks him beyond repair. It would be such a tragedy to dim James Potter's light.

But, of course, he doesn't say any of that.

He doesn't say anything.

Lupin gives him one last look before he starts walking again, throwing his next words over his shoulder:

"But God help you both when Sirius finds out."

He really wasn't going to go. Wasn't going to meet James in their room. Not tonight, not any night. It would be better that way, easier. They'd talk somewhere public. Somewhere that James couldn't make a scene. Somewhere that Regulus couldn't kiss him. Touch him. Couldn't even think about those things.

It's done.

We're done.

We never should have started.

But now we're done.

He meant to be cold and detached. Meant to be precise. A clean break. Better for the both of them. What is it people are always saying? Rip the band-aid off? Something like that. That's what Regulus was going to do.

So he doesn't know how he ends up standing inside the door of the Come and Go Room, staring at a beaming James Potter and feeling every ounce of his self-control fading away.

Stop it, he wants to shout at James, just like on the platform. Stop looking at me like that, like I mean something to you. I shouldn't. I can't. You should have known better. I tried to warn you.

"Hi," James says eventually, almost shyly.

"Hi," Regulus returns.

James is practically bouncing on the balls of his feet, like an over excited puppy. No one has ever wanted Regulus like this. Honestly, he's not sure anyone has ever wanted him at all.

He feels a spark run up his left arm.

"Can I—" James holds out his hand.

No.

No.

No.

“Yeah,” there’s barely a breath between the word leaving his mouth and James pressing into him, pushing him back until he hits the wall behind him, James’s mouth on his, hands in his hair. Under his shirt. Skating over his skin. James is everywhere, he’s all consuming, he’s warm and heavy and solid. Regulus is helpless against it.

He knew it would be like this. That’s why he did what he did. There’s no taking it back now. All he has to do is roll up his sleeve and James will leave and never look back. And James will be safe.

But Regulus doesn’t roll up his sleeve.

“Sorry,” James is whispering, his breath hot against Regulus’s neck. “Too much?”

Yes.

“No,” Regulus closes his eyes as James moves under his jaw, down to his shoulder, pushing his shirt collar out of the way, lips trailing along his clavicle.

“Tell me,” James says, voice breathy, “tell me if you need—tell me to stop.”

Regulus’s hands sweep up James’s back, strong from all the Quidditch, fingers tangling themselves in his hair. “No.”

James growls and suddenly his mouth is back on Regulus’s and Regulus tells himself not to think. Just this once. James picks him up, holds him against the wall.

It’s too much.

It’s too fast.

It shouldn’t be happening at all.

Regulus knows all of that, but he does nothing to stop it. Because he wants. He wants. And maybe he can have it, just this one time. Just for this moment. After that he’ll give James up. He will. He just needs a little bit more.

They end up on the bed. They kiss and kiss and kiss. Kissing James has always felt like flying to Regulus. Like it’s the thing he was made to do. The only part of his life that doesn’t feel like drowning.

The problem is, there’s always the moment when it gets all—all messed up. All tangled in everything that came before.

He wishes it didn’t.

He wishes it was simple.

Because he wants.

Sometimes he wants James so much he thinks he'll die from it.

It's too much.

It's too fast.

But maybe that's okay. Maybe it can hurt this time. Maybe it's supposed to. If it means he gets to have him. If he can pretend a little longer that he belongs to someone. And before he can think about it the words are tumbling out of his mouth—

“I think we should have sex.”

“Mm,” is all James says, kissing the point between his neck and his shoulder.

Stop, says the rational part of Regulus's brain, don't.

It's too much.

It's too fast.

“No, I think we should really—properly—have sex.”

James stills. After all the movement—the hands and mouths and breath—it feels loud, his stillness. A few seconds pass before James pulls back, sitting up so that he's straddling Reg's hips. His face flushed, hair more mussed than usual.

“You mean...”

Regulus nods.

Too much.

Too fast.

“Yeah,” Regulus swallows. “That's what I mean.”

James just keeps looking at him, eyes wide, hands running through his hair. Eventually he laughs, it's a nervous sound, skittish. Regulus can see the new tension in his shoulders, in the way he holds himself.

“I can't believe I'm saying this but I—I don't think I'm ready...for...that.”

And being the self-involved narcissist that he is, Regulus hadn't considered that James would say no. Hadn't considered what this would mean to him.

“Oh,” is what comes out of his mouth, which is the wrong thing. He instantly sees the uncertainty flicker across James's face.

“Is that okay?” James asks, rubbing at the back of his neck the way he does when he gets nervous.

“Yes,” Regulus hates his voice sometimes, how even when he tries to make it warm and soft it never seems to come out that way. There’s too much Black in him. Too much of his mother.

“Yes,” he tries again. “Yes it’s okay. Of course it’s—it was a stupid thing to ask anyway—I don’t even know—” his throat is suddenly dry, anxiety building under his skin.

Too much.

Too fast.

He just wants it to go away. He just wants to be able to do this—this normal thing. He just wants to pretend for a moment that he’s somebody else. Somebody that deserves to be here. But he can’t. Because the memories are always there. A rotting feeling in the pit of his stomach.

Too much.

Too fast.

“Sorry,” he says again, because he doesn’t know what else to say.

“Hey, woah, no, don’t be,” James looks at him a little curiously. “Reg, you get to—you know—ask for stuff. Ask for the stuff you want.”

He doesn’t know why that makes something in him ache. It’s too hot, it’s too much. His arm is fucking killing him and he can’t look at James but he also can’t look away. He’s so tired of feeling like this.

“Is it though?” James asks gently, breaking the silence, still looking at Regulus like he’s not sure what he’s seeing. “What you want, I mean? Are you—are you ready for…”

Regulus doesn’t know how to answer that question.

No.

He never will be.

It will always feel like this. Because he’s broken.

But he just wanted—

He just wanted—

His hands come up to his face, hiding it from view, and he must be tired, or wrecked, or something, to let the next words come out of his mouth; “I just wanted to be with you.”

It’s so pathetic.

So utterly pathetic.

And desperate.

And grasping.

As though sex would change anything.

Would make him feel better about walking away.

Would make him feel whole.

“Reg, hey, look at me?”

He doesn’t want to. He doesn’t know how to.

“Regulus.”

No one says his name like James. Like it’s worth something.

It’s a few more seconds before he’s able to let his hands fall away from his face, forcing his eyes up to meet the boy still hovering above him.

“You have me,” James says softly, running a finger along Regulus’s jaw that sends shivers through his whole body. “We have time.”

And don’t those words just feel like a knife in his side.

Regulus doesn’t answer. Can’t really, if he’s being honest. So he lets James run his gentle fingers along the shapes of his face, his neck, his shoulders. Purposeless touches—more reassurances than anything else. They say “I’m here” but all Regulus can think is “you shouldn’t be.”

“I’ve never,” James starts eventually, clearing his throat. “I’ve never done that before.”

Regulus blinks, coming back to himself. “You mean...with a boy?”

James lets out a breath of laughter. “I mean with anyone.”

It isn’t that Regulus hasn’t...guessed that. It’s only that sometimes he still forgets. Forgets that there’s the James Potter who everyone sees—this larger than life, cocky, asshole. And then there’s the actual James Potter. Just a boy. A boy who loves people more than he probably should.

“But you’ve—” James struggles with his words. “You have?”

Regulus feels too tight. His chest. His throat. “Yes,” he finally manages to say.

James nods above him. “With the—er—with the guy you were seeing before?”

“We weren’t seeing each other,” he’s struggling to breathe. “Can—can you—“ he taps on James’s thigh, which by some miracle seems to be enough for him to understand.

“Oh—yeah, sorry,” he slides off, Regulus sitting up, feet planting on the floor at the end of the bed. James is sitting next to him but Regulus doesn’t look at him. Can’t right now. He presses the heels of his hands into his eyes, trying to get himself back under control. He’s supposed to be better than this.

“Reg?” James says gently. Regulus doesn’t know how long they’ve been sitting in silence.

“Yes, sorry,” he pulls himself up straight, finding the posture that was beaten into him throughout his childhood. Black’s don’t slouch.

“Okay, you really need to stop apologizing.”

Regulus isn’t sure that that’s true. That it ever will be. All he feels is regret. He is made of apologies.

“We don’t—“ James starts and stops, Regulus still can’t look at him, eyes focused on the hands in his lap. James sighs and starts again. “We don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to but...something is—something is wrong, yeah?”

Regulus lets out a dry laugh. Yeah, something’s wrong.

“Is it—is it about the guy...?”

Regulus squeezes his eyes shut. Maybe this is the easiest place to start—to start showing James what’s really living inside his skin. How twisted up he is.

“He was older,” Regulus manages on his next exhale. He hears James shuffle closer.

“Okay,” he says the word softly, and Regulus knows it’s his way of letting him know that he’s listening, but part of him wishes he wouldn’t.

“This isn’t—“ Regulus’s voice shakes, and he swallows, trying to centre himself. “This isn’t exactly my proudest moment.”

“It’s okay Reg,” unfazed.

It isn’t.

God it isn’t.

“It—I was thirteen when it—when it started.”

He hears James’s sharp inhale and does his best not to flinch. Pushing on with the story.

“Sirius was always at yours, even before he left for good, and I was—“ it’s ash in his mouth, it’s bitter and vile and pathetic. “I was lonely.”

Regulus swallows, nails digging into his knees. “I—I liked it at first, the attention, the looks and the smiles and compliments. I didn’t know,” he lets out a breath, his whole body shaking. “I didn’t know where it was going until it—it happened the first time.”

The silence is deafening and Regulus has the intense desire to just disappear inside of himself. He could walk away, James might let him now.

I won’t even have to show him my arm, he thinks ruefully.

“How long did this go on for?” James asks eventually, Regulus has never heard his voice sound like that—cold.

He doesn’t want to have this conversation. He doesn’t want to think about this at all. It’s so much worse than he thought it’d be—dragging it all up out of the corners he’s stuffed it into.

“I promise not while we’ve been—nothing since we’ve been together,” he doesn’t know if that’s the right answer but it’s the only one he has.

There’s another aching pause, Regulus is about ready to crawl out of his skin. People always tell you to talk about things, he doesn’t know why. It’s never made him feel better. Just like he’s been pulled inside-out. Exposed.

“So last summer...?” there’s still something wrong with James’s voice but Regulus can’t make himself look at him.

“Listen, it’s not—I didn’t want it, but I just couldn’t...see the point in making an enemy in that house. I’m not a very—“ he laughs dryly. “I’m not a very brave person. Not very bold. I guess the sorting hat got that bit right.”

He rests his elbows on his knees, face in his hands as he tries to breathe, tries not to look like he’s falling apart. And fuck, his stupid arm really fucking hurts and he knows it’s in his head. It has to be. But it keeps getting worse, keeps getting sharper. Like it’s being burned into his skin all over again. He didn’t scream the first time, he wonders if he will now.

“Who?” James demands, barely even a question.

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Who fucking—“ James stops himself, and Regulus hears him take in a shaking breath. “Who was it, Regulus?”

Finally, Regulus forces himself to face him, to meet his stare. He’s surprised to find James seething. Every muscle in his body looks like it’s vibrating with tension, eyes on fire.

“Lucius Malfoy, he—“

“I know who he is,” James cuts him off, voice like steel. “Works with my dad sometimes, he’s married to your cousin.”

Regulus swallows, nodding. “Yes.”

They sit there, staring at one another. Regulus doesn't know where they go from here.

Nowhere, hisses the voice in his head. Exactly where you were always going.

"I'm going to kill him."

James's words are full of blades. They are barring their teeth. Not afraid of cutting you open and spilling you out. It's frightening honestly.

And of all the things Regulus could say—don't, and stop, and no—all he can think is:

"Why?"

James's face breaks for a second, the anger turning into pain and Regulus has to look down again—look away—he hates it. "Reg," James's voice is gentle.

"It's not—it doesn't matter—it's not—it isn't what you think." He clenches his teeth, trying to get a hold of the tremors in his voice.

"What I think?" James repeats slowly.

Regulus has started picking at the comforter. "I told you," he whispers, "I was lonely."

A pained noise comes from James's throat. "You were thirteen."

"Hardly a child," he repeats Narcissa's words, though he doesn't make them sound quite as convincing as she did. Something about the break in his voice, he imagines.

"Jesus Christ Regulus."

"Don't make this into something it's not."

"Something it's not? Regulus he—"

"NO."

The word comes out of him quickly and over loud. It lingers around them, like the smoke after a gunshot. And Regulus wants to go back to murderous James, to angry James, anything to get James to stop looking at him like he's an open wound.

He tries to shake it off, forcing his words to come out flat. "I didn't fight him James."

"You. Were. Thirteen."

"And then I was fourteen, it didn't make a difference. I barely even registered that anything was wrong. I let it happen, I always let it happen. So it wasn't—" but he can't finish that sentence. He's never even thought it really. It would make it all so much harder, to name the things that have happened to him.

"Always?" James asks. "What do you mean always?"

Regulus shakes his head, getting off the bed, pacing, considering just walking out the door. He should. He should have never walked in in the first place. “I mean always. With all of them—Flint and Snape and—“

“Snape?”

Oh.

Oh Regulus knows better than that. But his brain is all scattered, like a stack of papers he can’t get in order, that keep slipping out of his hands.

“What the fuck did Snape do?” James is on his feet now too, that look back on his face—like he’s about to kill someone with his bare hands.

“No,” Regulus says, “Not—I didn’t mean—“ his hands run over his face and he breathes in. “He—he found out about me, about me being—“ and he can’t say that one either, for fear that somehow his mother might magically appear in the middle of the room. Sighing, frustrated, he pushes forward. “He used it to blackmail me—get me to do things for him—and I just let him, for years I just let him. Because that’s what I do. That’s who I am.”

“Okay, well he’s also going to die—“

“No, don’t you get it?” and now he’s getting angry, except it’s the kind of angry where his throat is too tight and his eyes too wet. “It’s me. I’m the problem. I’m the common denominator here.” It comes out sounding so much more desperate than he means it to. Because he doesn’t care, really, he doesn’t. He knows who he is. He’s always known. He grew up watching Sirius fight and stand his ground. He grew up leaving Sirius behind, to face their mother on his own while Regulus hid in his bedroom.

He knows who he is.

“Regulus,” James’s voice brings him back, and he has the feeling it’s not the first time he’s said it. “Regulus look at me?”

And so he does. It’s a saying—the world stopped—but the world really does stop when he looks at James Potter. The entirety of the universe suddenly holding its breath.

“You are not the bad things that have happened to you.”

“Fuck. Off.”

But, of course, that doesn’t stop James. “None of it was your fault Reg. None of it, I can’t—I can’t even—you didn’t deserve it.”

Regulus shakes his head, not sure how he’s still standing when his legs are shaking this badly. “I did. I did. Can’t you see that?” he’s begging, begging for James to understand. To let him have this. Because if it was his fault than it doesn’t hurt. Than he didn’t lose anything, because things never could have been any different. Because no one could have saved him. And if nobody could have than it doesn’t matter that nobody did. Not even Sirius.

“I deserved all of it,” he’s crying now, voice cutting itself up on its way out of his mouth. “I deserved it. I deserved it. I deserved it.”

“Regulus,” and James sounds nearly as wrecked as he does, eyes wide as he steps forward. “I’m so sorry.”

He just shakes his head, he has nothing left, he’s wrung out. “I deserved it,” he chokes, words barely audible.

“You didn’t Reg.”

And he hates him, even as he stands there, arms open but not coming closer. Because he won’t touch Regulus, not until he tells him it’s okay. And even though every rational thought in Regulus’s head screams “no” he feels himself reach out, pulling James to him, burying his face in his chest. Like coming home. Warm and safe.

“It’s okay,” James rests his chin on the top of Regulus’s head, hands stroking slow circles on his back. “It’s okay, we’re going to be okay.”

Regulus doesn’t bother correcting him. He doesn’t have the energy.

“I love you,” James whispers into his hair, causing Regulus to push into him further, like he’s trying to crawl inside his ribcage. “I love you so much.”

“I wish you didn’t.”

James lets out a noise somewhere between a laugh and a sob. “I know,” he says, squeezing Regulus tighter. “But I do, I always will.”

And God, Regulus hopes that isn’t true. Hopes that one day James Potter forgets all about him. That he goes on and lives his beautiful perfect life. That he isn’t weighed down by everything dark and heavy that sits inside Regulus’s skin. James deserves more. Deserves better than that.

You could roll up your sleeve.

You could let him go now.

It would be so easy.

Regulus’s hands are twisted-up in the back of James’s shirt and he pulls him closer even though there’s no space between them.

“I’m gonna protect you Reg,” James is whispering again.

“I don’t need you to protect me,” he mutters into James’s chest.

“Well fuck you, I’m going to anyway.”

You can't, Regulus doesn't say. You never could have. It was always too late for me. I was always a lost cause.

"Then I'll protect you back."

I'll show him the mark.

I will.

Soon.

James laughs wetly. "Yeah, I'm pretty sure that's how it works."

"How what works?" Regulus snuffles, only pulling away from James enough to speak.

"Being with someone."

Another blade in his side. Another ache in his arm. This boy is exhausting, always tearing down the walls that Regulus has spent years building up, that have kept him together for most of his life.

"I hate you," the words are out of his mouth before he can stop them.

James sighs, kissing the top of his head. "Yeah, I know that too."

Chapter End Notes

Hello lovelies!

Listen, for a Regulus chapter that wasn't that bad.

I mean, that last scene still makes me cry every time I read it, but no one was actively trying to harm him so for Regulus that's really a win.

I hope you're all having a great day!

Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

Snuffles

Chapter Notes

tw: referenced/implied child abuse (specifically involving food at one point)

tw: internalized homophobia (but like, self-aware internalized homophobia?)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

There's a sort of high that comes from not giving a shit. At least if you do it right. It's almost like a switch in Sirius's brain that he can just... flick. And then it's as if nothing matters—what people think, what they want from him. It's better than sex, honestly.

The come down's a bitch though.

He used to think he could control it—the switch. It wasn't until last year, until he told Snape about Remus, until he watched the horror wash over James's face, that he realized how stupid that was.

To this day he can't really remember that moment—the moment he decided to blow-up his whole life. It certainly hadn't occurred to him that that was what he was doing. It had all just seemed so pointless for a moment—the secrets, the fear—and then it had seemed funny. The idea of Snape face to face with a werewolf.

Not a werewolf.

His brain corrects itself.

Moony.

Remus.

The boy with the beautiful eyes and the shaggy hair and the smile that's afraid of itself.

That boy.

Mine. Mine. Mine. Mine.

He hadn't had any of those thoughts that night though. Hadn't felt any of that ache. He'd been alone for hours by that point, slowly growing more and more numb. Until he didn't mind so much that his uncle was dead. That it was probably his fault. It was so like his mother honestly, to kill someone just to get back at him. Just to punish him. He'd stayed alone until he could make himself not feel it anymore.

And then Snape had been there, making some crack about Remus being sick. About how frail he was. How pathetic. Sirius could remember laughing at that. Because it was funny, honestly, to have Severus Snape calling Remus Lupin weak. When at that very moment he was mere minutes away from turning into a full-fledged monster.

Not a monster.

Moony.

Remus.

Mine. Mine. Mine. Mine.

In that moment the only thing that had felt funnier than Snape not knowing what an ass he was making out of himself. Was him knowing exactly how much of an ass he was making out of himself. So he'd told him where to go, if he wanted to know why Remus was always so sick. And as he'd watched Snape walk away he'd felt that familiar high. Of doing the thing he wasn't supposed to do. Of not giving a shit.

The comedown really is a bitch.

It's early, too earlier, honestly. No one in their right mind would be up this early, but then, James has always been a little more nuts than people give him credit for. At least in Sirius's opinion.

He's sitting in the stands, watching the Gryffindor team finish their first practice since tryouts. They look alright, the holes left behind by Frank and Alice are big, but not insurmountable, and James has been able to find some good new talent. The Keeper in particular—a third year, Jeremy or Renly or something—is going to be an absolute star. Sirius can already see it.

He watches them land, watches them huddle around James on the ground. Mary's the easiest to pick out even from this distance—dark hair braided down her back, hip cocked, arms crossed. He can't help but wonder how that's going for James—getting her under control. Mary's a brilliant player, and honestly the funniest person Sirius knows, but she'll cause problems just for the hell of it. And she's certainly not afraid to push James around.

Sirius tears his eyes away from the ground, grabbing hold of his own broom and heading down to the pitch. Him and James are...honestly, he doesn't really know. They're friendly, he guesses. But even thinking the word makes him scrunch up his face like he's smelt something

bad. Him and James have never been “friendly” before. They were strangers and then friends and then brothers. There was no intermediate stage of awkward polite small talk.

Sirius hates it.

He gets down to the field just as the team starts breaking up and heading towards the locker rooms. He stays in the shadows of the stands, watching James talk to one of the newer players. Sirius can’t hear what he’s saying, but he imagines it’s some sort of pep talk. James looks fully in his element.

This is a big deal, James being Captain. It’s one of those things he’s always talked about, even back in first year. He had so many dreams—Sirius had never met anyone like that before. Someone who knew what they wanted and thought they could get it. He came from a family with very specific requirements. You had your life dictated to you and you coloured within those lines. The Black family didn’t have dreams, they had expectations.

James claps the kid on the shoulder, and as the younger boy starts to pull away Sirius steps forward, trying to pretend he isn’t nervous. Because he shouldn’t be. Because he never used to be.

“Oi! Wanker with the bad hair,” he calls out, causing James to swivel around, confusion soon replaced by a surprised grin.

“Nah, it can’t be, look at you! All up and dressed and it’s not even eight a.m yet. I’ve never been so proud,” James wipes a nonexistent tear from the corner of his eye.

“You’re about as funny as the Bloody Baron you know that?”

“I happen to think the Baron is plenty funny, thank you very much.”

“I love it when you prove my point.”

James snorts, shoving Sirius’s shoulder playfully before his eyes fall on the broom in his hands. He looks back at Sirius, brow arched in question.

He feels his nerves flare up again but quickly shuts them down. It’s such a stupid feeling. Especially here. About this.

“I was wondering if you had any energy left for a quick fly?” his causal tone almost sounds convincing.

“Er...” James pauses, and Sirius feels his heart sink. There never would have been a question before, but he knows that now James is thinking about Remus. How Remus will feel when they walk into breakfast together, how quickly he’ll excuse himself from the table.

“You know what, don’t worry about it,” Sirius tries to laugh it off. “Never mind, it’s fine.” He starts to turn away.

“Hey—no,” James calls out, causing Sirius to pause, turning back to him. “Course I have energy for a fly,” James shoots him a slightly strained smile as he picks up his own broom.

“We’ve got—what? Half an hour?”

Sirius nods. “Yeah, yeah, about. You sure? Cause if you’re—“

“Sirius,” James gives him a pointed look, “don’t be an idiot, get on the bloody broom.” And with that James swings his leg over his own and kicks off, bringing the first genuine smile to Sirius’s face.

It feels good—the minute he’s off the ground—it feels real good. He didn’t touch his broom all summer, couldn’t quite bear it. Every time he looked at it it was just a reminder of another thing he’d lost. He isn’t James, flying isn’t his life, but that doesn’t mean he doesn’t miss it. That he isn’t still gutted that after years of talking about what they were going to do when James made Captain he isn’t even there to see it. To be a part of it.

They fly a few laps around the pitch, doing dives and flips. Sirius can do this one move that James has never mastered—where he swings down, hanging off his broom by his legs. Technically, it’s against regulations (it’s not, strictly speaking, safe) and when he tried it in a game McGonagall benched him (it was worth it honestly), but it drives James batty that he can’t do it.

“I just don’t understand how you get back up,” James says as he circles around Sirius who is just settling back onto his broom. “Where does the momentum come from?”

“A magician never reveals his secrets.”

James lets out an irritated scoff. “Prick.”

“Twat”

They both smile, it feels good. It feels normal. Sort of. Almost.

“So,” Sirius says, as they float lazily in the air, the early morning sky growing brighter around them. “How’s the team?”

He sees James shift into captain mode, sees the serious look in his eyes, the straightening of his shoulders. That’s his best mate right there. Fucking unstoppable.

“Really good actually, it’s the most new players since our second year but so far they’re meshing really well. I think we stand a chance.”

“You better, if I have to watch Slytherin win again I swear I’m going to drown myself in the lake,” he ignores the scratchy feeling in his chest when he talks about himself as a spectator. Just another member of the crowd.

“Merlin, me too,” James runs a hand through his hair. “They have a solid team, but, I think our real competition is Ravenclaw. They have a chip on their shoulders after last year.”

“Oh they have a chip?” Sirius asks coldly. “You’re the one who had a Bludger lodged in your fucking skull. Tell your beaters to give them shit all game. I swear I’ll get up here and do it myself if I have to. Cheating bastards.”

James stops moving, looking at Sirius and arching his brow.

“What?” Sirius demands defensively.

“You’re just sounding a bit bitter that’s all.”

“Please, bitter? Moi? Never. I’m sweet as honey,” he smiles with all his teeth, causing James to laugh through his nose. “I just might have also meticulously planned the deaths of every single Ravenclaw player who was on the field that day.”

James rolls his eyes. “You know it wasn’t all of their faults right?”

Sirius shrugs, unconcerned by this fact. “Guilt by association.”

“That’s not how that works.”

“We’ll see.”

James shakes his head, laughing dryly. “Thank Merlin you won’t be playing against them,” he freezes, realizing what he’s just said, eyes growing wide. “I don’t mean—obviously I want you to be—” he sighs. “I didn’t mean that the way it came out.”

Sirius nods stiffly. “Yeah, I got that. Don’t worry about it. It’s fine,” which is not true but he doesn’t want James’s pity. It won’t fix anything. It’ll just make him feel like even more of a fuck up.

He hooks his feet under his footrests and lies back on his broom. James making a disapproving noise in the background that brings the smile back to Sirius’s face.

“Don’t know why you do that, it’s bloody uncomfortable.”

“Maybe you’re just doing it wrong.”

James flies over him sticking out his tongue before climbing higher in the sky. Sirius laughs, watching James do a few flips and barrel turns. He can hear birds somewhere—it sounds far away—and the noise of the lake gently brushing against the shore. Right now, Remus is probably showering, then he’ll try to do some reading before going down to breakfast. He’ll have eggs—over easy—on toast—lightly buttered—with some gross mixture of every juice available at the table.

“What?” he’d said once, when he caught Sirius making a face at his glass. “It’s all just fruit anyway.”

Of course, Sirius won’t be there to see Remus’s incredibly predictable morning routine or incredibly gross beverage habits. He doesn’t sit with them at meals anymore. One look at Remus’s face on their first day back was enough to tell him that he wasn’t welcome. So he sits with the girls instead. It’s what he did at the end of last year too.

“I just want you to know,” James is slightly breathless from all the flying as he pulls himself back up to Sirius’s side. “That if you fall asleep and roll off your broom I’m not going to

catch you.”

Sirius snorts, still staring up at the sky. “Some best mate you are.”

“Hey man, I’m just being honest.”

There’s a beat of silence.

“Your boy doing alright then?” Sirius asks, cringing at the falsely cheery sound of his voice. Not because he isn’t happy for James, but because he doesn’t know how to talk about this.

More silence.

Sirius thinks it’s probably good that his current reclined position prevents them from making eye contact.

“My boy?” James asks eventually.

“Oh I’m sorry, does he have a title?” Sirius asks dryly. “Boyfriend? Lover? James’s bitch?”

James laughs. “Definitely that last one.”

“I thought so,” another pause, this has been a new thing with them recently, this stilted air to their conversations. Both of them hesitating too often, tiptoeing around one another. “But seriously—“

“Siriusly?”

Sirius glares, even though he’s still not looking at James. “Potter, we’ve had this discussion. That pun belongs to me and me alone.”

“Sorry, sorry,” he hears the sound of him stifling a laugh. “Forgive me, I forgot. You were saying something?”

Sirius huffs. “Well now I’m feeling way less generous, but I was saying...” he clears his throat. “That, you know, whatever you want me to—to call him, or you, or this thing—whatever you want. Just...let me know okay?” They haven’t really talked about it since James told him. Too much happened after that. Too much silence. Of course, James is a bit like that in general—loud and obnoxious about the things that don’t matter and quiet about the things that do.

Finally, Sirius pulls himself upright again, getting a bit of a head rush as he sits properly on his broom. He look over at his best friend whose face is a knot of emotions Sirius can’t seem to untie. He’s about to change the subject again when James finally speaks.

“Honestly, I don’t really have names for...any of it,” he says, a bit nervously.

Sirius nods. “That’s fair. Personally, I’ve never been a big fan of labels.”

“Yeah,” James rubs the back of his neck, looking distant.

“Do Effie and Fleamont know?”

James lets out a dry laugh. “Funny, that’s the first thing he wanted to know too.” And then he cringes, like he’s just given too much away.

Sirius, who, quite honestly, was never going to like anyone James seriously dated because he’s always been bad at sharing, definitely isn’t a fan of this guy. Not a fan of the sneaking and lying and secrets. James has never kept anything from Sirius before—at least not that he knows of. And he hates this guy for putting that wedge between them.

“He know them?” Sirius asks. Because while, yes, he respects James’s privacy, he is also desperate to figure out who this guy is.

James shrugs. “Knows “of” them more like.”

Ah. That sounds like a pureblood then. Interesting. Certainly narrows it down.

“So?” he prods.

James blinks. “Sorry?”

Sirius rolls his eyes, exhaling dramatically. “Do they know?”

James continues to stare at him blankly before his brain catches up to him. “Oh—my parents? Merlin, I don’t know,” he runs a hand over his face. “Pretty sure my mum does, you know how she is.”

Sirius nods, smiling a little. He does. She’s brilliant.

“We haven’t talked about it or anything, but, she says things sometimes...I don’t know. She doesn’t seem to care. My dad? Nah, not a clue. You saw him though, he’s so busy these days.”

Sirius likes Fleamont. He’s a bit of nerd, but funny, and kind—and busy. He always has been, as long as Sirius has known him. James doesn’t really talk about being bothered by it, but Sirius thinks sometimes he is.

“It—my parents, they’ve never, I don’t know, they’ve never talked about marriage or heirs or any of that,” James wrinkles his nose. “I know that stuff is, like, important. I know that the Potter name is important. But they’ve never made me feel like that was something that I had to carry on or plan my life around,” he’s looking at Sirius earnestly. “It was different for you?”

Sirius blinks, surprised by the question, and then he laughs. “Yeah, yeah it was different. It’s —“ he’s not even sure where to start, memories flashing through his head he’d rather not see. “It’s everything to them, the family name, you sort of—you sacrifice yourself to it. And I was —“ He can feel it, the ghost of her fingers, on his shoulder, on the back of his neck, nails digging in. Reminding him that he was owned. She was always touching him like that. Possessively.

“Anyway,” he shakes his head, eyes focusing again. “Anything that threatened the line was the root of all evil. That would have included...”

“Fancying boys?”

“Yeah,” Sirius bites his lower lip, remembering how it had felt to press against Remus. To hold him properly. The way he hadn’t realized he’d been craving. Hadn’t let himself think about. “It would be a kind of corruption to them. Only a Black who was deficient in some way, weak or broken, would act against the interest of the family.”

That sits between them, and Sirius swears they sink lower, like the words are an anchor, a weight dragging them down. He tries not to think about what came after that kiss. The way the shame and fear had felt so sharp—so real—like claws dragging through his chest, ripping him apart. He tries not to think about the look on Remus’s face when he’d jumped back. When he’d left. Left him there. Alone.

It’s all so much more complicated than people make it seem. I hate myself, he’d wanted to explain to Remus. I hate myself for doing it. For wanting it. But I don’t hate you. I don’t hate you for being there. I don’t hate you for wanting it too.

James has gone pale and Sirius tries to smile, to shake it off. “But hey, it’s not like I needed to snog blokes to be deficient in their eyes anyway right? I mostly ignored all that bullshit.”

It’s a blatant lie and he knows that James can tell. That he, more than anyone, knows all the insidious ways that Walburga has managed to stick to Sirius. The ways he hears her voice, and smells her breath, and feels her magic. They’re so unimaginative, the insults she whispers in his ears on an almost daily basis:

Disappointment.

Worthless.

Embarrassment.

As though he wants to impress her. As though he wants to be something she’s proud of. Of course, he knows that part of the reason his mother hates him so much is that she had been proud of him. She’d had a son, first try, provided an heir for the Noble House of Black, did her duty. Sirius was supposed to be her crowning achievement. And he had failed her at every turn.

“Padfoot?” James brings him back to the present, the sun now almost fully in the sky. He meets James’s eyes—kind and warm, the polar opposite of his own. “It really is bullshit, all of it. You know that, right?”

Sirius struggles to swallow. “Yeah,” he says, eyes trailing treacherously in the direction of the Whomping Willow.

“Remus told me,” he finds himself saying suddenly, “that you know about—“ he grits his teeth, a frustrated noise coming from the back of his throat. They’re just words. When the

fuck did he start being afraid of words? “Me and...him...”

“I do.”

Sirius nods, still looking off into the distance. “You haven’t said anything about it,” he goes on eventually.

James lets out a dry laugh. “Well, to be fair, it kind of got dropped on me in the middle of... everything. But,” he pauses for a moment, like he’s trying to be careful about what he says next. “I sort of figured you deserved the chance to tell me yourself—or, you know, not tell me, if that’s what you wanted.”

Fucking James.

“You already knew though,” he finally tears his eyes away from the scenery and back to the face of his best mate. “Right? That night you said—you said it was going to break his heart that it was me, out of all of us. You knew.”

A complicated expression comes over James’s face that Sirius can’t quite work out.

“Yeah,” he says finally. “I knew,” he shrugs. “I saw the way you looked at him.”

Sirius lets out a huff, strangling the pain that tries to rear its ugly head inside his chest. “See, that’s what bothers me about this whole—whole thing with you.”

James arches his brow so Sirius continues.

“I didn’t notice. If you’ve been making heart-eyes at someone I haven’t seen it.”

“You knew I was seeing someone,” but Sirius only shakes his head.

“Only cause you came back to the common room with your bloody shirt on inside out. Anyone would have noticed that, but I’m supposed to—I’m supposed to know you better. This big thing happened to you and somehow I missed it.”

“To be fair, I was trying to hide it.”

“Not the point.”

“You’re not a mindreader Sirius.”

“But I’m supposed to be!” and despite the ridiculousness of the statement he says it earnestly. “That’s us isn’t it? We see each other.”

There’s a pause, James’s gaze growing fond, and when he speaks Sirius can hear the affection in his voice. It makes him feel guilty. He doesn’t deserve it.

“You do see me.”

“I didn’t see this,” he throws his hands up in exasperation.

“Okay,” James bites his lip, clearly trying to hold back a laugh, “honestly, Sirius, of all the things you have to worry about, this is not one of them.”

Sirius lets out an aggravated sigh, scrubbing at his face before he’s able to look at James again. “You thought that you couldn’t tell me,” he says weakly.

James’s eyes get a little sad. “I didn’t really.”

“You did.”

They float there, next to one another, wind gently knocking into them.

“It’s less that I thought that I couldn’t,” James says eventually. “And more that—the stakes just felt so high.”

“What do you mean?”

James blows the hair off his sweaty forehead. They’ll have to go down soon, they’re cutting it close now and James is still in full Quidditch gear.

“I thought you’d be okay with it, but I also knew that if I was wrong we would be—there’d be no coming back from that.” James lets out a breath, “As much as I didn’t think you’d react badly, as long as there was a chance—“

“There wasn’t,” Sirius cuts him off, face stern. “There was no chance.”

A sort of sad half-smile pulls at James’s mouth. “I mean, with people there’s always a chance.”

Sirius narrows his eyes, then reaches across the space between them and smacks James on the back of the head.

“Ow! What the hell?!”

“I’m the pessimist,” Sirius points emphatically at his chest. “Me, my job. You don’t say shit like that—you’re James bloody Potter—you believe in people, all people, even the shitty ones. Example A,” he gestures to himself.

James grumpily rubs at the back of his head. “It’s not my job to be optimistic all the time.”

“Uh—yeah, it is. It’s like, literally your job.”

James arches his brow. “Actually, it’s very literally literally not my job.”

“Well it certainly isn’t metaphorically your job.”

James blinks at him. “I can’t tell if it’s the head injury or this conversation that’s making me feel dizzy.”

“I barely touched you.”

“I can feel a bump—look—feel it.” James tries to move his broom closer but Sirius instantly backs up.

“Ew no, you’re all sweaty and gross.”

James glares at him. “You didn’t mind a minute ago when you were brutalizing me.”

Sirius rolls his eyes. “So dramatic—besides, I was filled with righteous indignation. Now I’m just wishing you washed your hair a little more. Jesus James, are you taking grooming tips from snivellus?”

James actually gasps. “You take that back!”

Sirius can’t help it, he bursts out laughing.

“I mean it,” James punches him in the arm, Sirius laughing too hard to dodge it, “take it back.”

“Alright, alright,” Sirius hiccups, trying to get himself together. “Your hair is nothing like Snape’s.”

“Damn right it isn’t. Stop smiling!”

“I can’t help it! You’re so cute when you get all riled up about your hair.”

James shakes his head, trying and failing to keep a straight face, the pair of them dissolving into a fit of snickering, no longer sure what they’re even laughing at.

“Listen,” Sirius says when he’s able to be sincere again. “I just want you to know, you can talk to me about—about this. About him.”

The childish joy fades from James’s face and he shifts on his broom, looking suddenly uncomfortable.

“I told you, he doesn’t—doesn’t want anyone to know.”

Sirius nods. “Understood, but I can still give excellent advice even if I don’t know his name.”

“Oh really?” James smirks. “Excellent advice huh?”

“Well, clearly you’ll need guidance from someone more experienced.”

“I don’t think you have the kind of experience I need.”

“Eh,” Sirius shrugs. “Girl, boy, what’s the difference really?”

James snorts. “You’re not inspiring confidence here.”

“The real question,” Sirius smiles, leaning forward on his broom, “is, is the great James Potter still a virgin?”

James blushes, the colour deep and quickly spreading up his neck and over his cheeks.

“I’ll take that as a yes. Jeez, you two are really taking your time huh? It’s been like, what? A year?”

“Wow, you know what? I don’t think I have ever wanted to have a conversation less than I want to have this one.”

“Listen, if it’s your game that needs work, I can help with that.”

James glares. “My game is fine, thank you.”

“I mean, apparently not.”

“Well we can’t all be Sirius Black.”

Sirius beams despite the rather sarcastic tone of James’s voice. “That’s certainly true, but you can always try.”

“So modest.”

“One of my best qualities.”

James laughs, shaking his head, cheeks still bright red. “Listen it’s—we—I like where we are. Okay?”

There’s something in his voice that gives Sirius pause. It’s all... warm and gooey. James has a stupid smile on his face too, like maybe he means it, like maybe he’s happy.

Sirius lets out a low whistle. “Well shit, you really like this guy huh?”

James blinks, like he hadn’t realized what a stupid mooning expression he’d been making. “I—er—yeah. A bit.”

Sirius nods, giving James a small smile. “I hope he deserves it.”

“He does,” James doesn’t hesitate.

I doubt it, Sirius can’t help but think. Few people deserve James.

“But he doesn’t want you to talk to your friends about him?” Sirius asks.

James’s grimaces. “It’s...complicated.”

“It always is.”

“Sirius—“

But Sirius holds up his hands in surrender. “Look, I don’t know him, so my opinion basically doesn’t matter. Just, be careful, okay? You deserve someone who isn’t afraid to love you back.”

James sits there for a moment, a thoughtful expression on his face. “How can you say that to me when you can’t say it to yourself?” he asks, not unkindly.

Sirius shrugs. “Easier to care about other people I guess.”

James looks sad about that but Sirius doesn’t really feel like getting into it so he quickly adds; “We should probably head back.”

James opens his mouth, like he might object, but then closes it again. After a few seconds he sighs. “Yeah, probably.”

It’s a quiet descent back to the ground.

They do walk into the Great Hall together, but stop a good ways away from where Peter and Remus are sitting. For a minute the pair of them just stand there staring.

“Well,” Sirius manages eventually. “I’ll see you later I guess,” he tries to inject as much casual ease into his voice as he can while simultaneously drinking up the sight of Remus. Despite once again sharing a dorm room, he really doesn’t see him much.

“You could, you know, sit with us?” though James barely manages to say it without grimacing.

“Nah mate,” he ignores the ache in his chest. “You’re alright, I’m gonna go sit with Evan’s,” he nods to the redhead a few spots away, who is, surprisingly, eating alone this morning.

“Right,” James rubs the back of his neck. “Right okay, well, see you I guess.” James takes a few steps towards their friends before turning back. “It was—nice, this morning.”

Sirius smiles. “Second date you’re paying. And if you take me somewhere fancy I might even put out.”

James rolls his eyes, smiling despite himself. “Oh, get fucked Sirius.”

“That’s the idea. Keep this up and you might actually lose—”

“YES OKAY THANK YOU,” James is blushing again.

“Just trying to help,” Sirius says in a sing-song voice, biting back a smirk.

James waves off his words, muttering curses at him under his breath as he turns around and keeps going this time. Sirius pretends that he doesn’t feel it like a hook in his gut, the overwhelming sense of being left behind.

“Lily, darling, light of my life, how are you?” he’s big and showy and obnoxious, sliding into the seat next to her. It’s easier this way. To pretend to be this other person. To flick the switch.

She looks up from her coursework, a slightly bemused smile on her face. “You’re in a good mood today.”

“Pfft,” he scoffs. “I’m always in a good mood.” He reaches over and snags a piece of bacon off her plate.

“Oi—Sirius! Honestly, there’s some right there,” she points to the full platter in the centre of the table.

Sirius shrugs, smiling around his bacon. “Just doesn’t taste the same when it’s not stolen.”

Lily rolls her eyes, very purposefully moving her plate further out of his reach.

“So,” he asks, eyes lazily perusing the table in front of him, “where is everybody?”

“Mary and Marlene are napping before class, and Dorcas is doing some kind of extra credit thing with the owls for Magical Creatures.”

Sirius arches his brow. “Extra credit? Jesus. And I thought you were the swot.”

Lily elbows him in the ribs. “You know, some of us have interests outside of wreaking havoc and shagging every bird in sight.”

“Do you?” Sirius asks, frowning. “How sad for you all.”

“Somehow we manage.”

Sirius snorts, picking disinterestedly at the food in front of him. He isn’t hungry, rarely is these days, but that happens to him sometimes. His body will just...turn off. When he was younger one of his mother’s favourite punishments was starving him. No dinner. Not until you sit up straight. Not until you apologize to your father. Not until you learn some manners. He often wonders if somewhere along the line it became the way he punishes himself too.

“Oh bullocks.”

Sirius and Lily both look down the table to where James is currently standing up in his seat, water spilt all down the front of his white shirt.

Sirius snorts. “Idiot,” he says fondly. “How long do you reckon it’ll take before he remembers he has a wand and can just charm it dry?”

After a beat of silence he looks over at Lily, but her gaze is still very much focused on James.

“Evans? Yoo-hoo?” still nothing. That’s when Sirius notices the slightly glazed look in her eyes.

No, he thinks, no way.

His gaze darts between her and his best mate—who is now being dried by Remus.

No way. No way. No way.

“Oi!” he snaps his fingers in front of Lily’s face and she starts, nearly knocking over her pumpkin juice.

“Shit, sorry,” flustered she runs a hand through her hair, speckled cheeks turning bright red.

“Enjoying the wet t-shirt contest?”

“What? No. What are you even—? I don’t even know what you’re talking about.”

Sirius watches her grab the wrong end of her fork and enthusiastically attempt to start eating her eggs, like that will somehow convince him that nothing is going on. It’s really a testament to her commitment that she doesn’t give up after the first try, instead doing her best to make it look as though she meant to use her utensil handle first.

“Uh-huh,” he says, barely holding back a laugh. “The universe really is a bitch huh?”

He watches Lily grimace, eyes still trained on her eggs.

Sirius sighs, leaning in a little closer and lowering his voice. “The gig is up Lily, I’ve seen you ogling him.”

“I was not ogling!” she hisses.

Sirius gives her a pointed look, refusing to break until eventually she gives up attempting to eat her eggs with the handle of her fork and looks back at him.

“Sirius,” she says solemnly.

He bites his lip. “Lily.”

“You cannot, under any circumstances, tell anyone.”

Sirius can’t hold it back any longer, he laughs, shaking his head. “I feel like I’ve fallen into an alternate dimension or something. Like in what world does Lily Evans fancy James Potter?”

“Will you keep your voice down!” she kicks him under the table.

“Ow—shit, you have pointy toes Evans,” he reaches down to rub his leg.

“Sirius, really, not a soul. Not even as a joke. Especially not Mary—Merlin, she’ll never let me hear the end of it.”

“And you think I will?”

She lets out a groan. “No, not really. But at least I can intimidate you.”

Sirius scoffs. “You can’t—Jesus, fuck, my poor legs. Are you wearing steel-toed boots or something?”

He feels the quickly swelling bump on the top of his shin.

“Not. A. Word.” Lily emphasizes each word, stare unwavering.

“Yes, alright, alright,” he straightens up, Lily watching him warily. There’s a brief pause before Sirius can work up the courage to risk another kick. “Why haven’t you said anything though, to him I mean?” he gestures to James with his chin.

Lily exhales, collapsing back in her seat. “God, I don’t know. I’ve not really accepted it myself I guess. Plus,” she grimaces, “over the summer he said he liked us better as friends.”

Sirius takes in a sharp breath. “Ouch.”

Lily nods. “Yeah, so, you know...” she wipes a hand over her face. “Anyway, I’m sure it’ll pass.” She looks at him as though expecting reassurance. Funny really, seeing as he’s been telling himself the same thing for months.

“Er—yeah, probably. These things do don’t they?”

Lily nods again, both of their eyes trailing back to the other end of the table, though Sirius suspects not to the same person.

The hours between classes and meals, which used to be Sirius’s favourite, have now become a little awkward for him. He finds himself floating around not really sure where he’s supposed to be. He can’t hang out with the marauders, which also means that the common room and library are somewhat off limits. He could, and does, hang out with the girls, but honestly, he can’t help but feel he’s intruding sometimes. Not unwelcome exactly but just... not wanted.

Which more or less sums up his entire existence at this point. Unwanted.

Sure, Sirius has a great many acquaintances. Some a little more desperate to hang out with him than he’d like. But he can never relax in those settings, he always has to perform. It gets exhausting. Besides, he doesn’t like any of them half as much as he likes James, Remus and Peter.

So that’s how he finds himself wandering around the castle one evening. How he stumbles on his brother alone in one of Hogwarts’s many courtyards, books and parchment surrounding him, nose practically pressed to the page in front of him.

Under normal circumstances Sirius would ignore him and keep going, but truth be told, he’s bored. And lonely. And reckless. So instead of continuing down the hallway like he knows he ought to, he finds himself stepping outside.

“Well what do we have here?” he stops in front of his brother, hands in his pockets. It’s after supper, the sky overcast and gloomy. The summer heat still lingers these days but it’s starting to break. Sirius can just feel the start of a cold breeze, fall poking its head out.

Regulus looks up, eyes widening for a second before he pulls a blank expression over his face. They've always been opposites, him and Reg. His brother hides behind dead eyes, Sirius hides behind a smile.

"Can I help you with something?" Regulus asks flatly.

"I doubt it."

Regulus continues to stare at him for a few seconds before turning back to his coursework.
"Alright then."

Regulus is one of those things that Sirius flips the switch on. One of those things it's easier not to give a shit about.

I mean, he's not a thing.

Technically.

Technically, he's a person.

But it's easier not to think about him that way—not to think about him as his actual brother. As the boy who used to crawl into his bed at night and look at Sirius like he could protect him from the monsters. Some days, Sirius thinks the only reason he got into Gryffindor at all is Regulus. It's always easier to brave for someone else.

Reg looks up again. "You're still here?"

"Sure am," Sirius grins, an empty expression. He knows Regulus can see it. Probably the only thing they know about each other anymore is how to spot their masks.

"Why?"

Complicated question that. Why.

"Something's been bugging me," he goes on casually. "Since that day on the platform."

It's small—the tensing of Regulus's jaw—but Sirius still catches it.

"Oh?" his little brother asks tersely.

"Wanted to make sure your arm was okay," he nods towards the body part in question.

There it is again. His teeth clenching.

"It's fine."

Sirius nods, still smiling. "Good, good, wouldn't want you to have to sit out your first Quidditch match or anything."

Regulus doesn't reply.

“So...let me see it.”

“See what, my Quidditch match?”

If anything, Sirius’s smile gets wider, more manic, sharpening at the corners.

“Your arm Reg. Let me see your arm.”

His little brother holds his gaze before looking back down. “No.”

None of this feels like anything. None of it matters. It’s all one big fucking joke.

“Nah, come on Reggie, show me.”

“I’d like you to leave now.”

Sirius laughs, it’s a high tinny noise, sounding foreign even to his own ears. “I’m sure you would. I mean, listen, I can fight you if you want. But I’d rather we be civil about this.”

Regulus looks back up. “I don’t have to show you anything.”

Sirius could leave it alone, he knows he could. But he’s never been very good at that.

He reaches out for Regulus’s arm, his brother moving just fast enough to pull out of his reach, spilling his books onto the floor as he gets to his feet.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” Regulus snarls, and Sirius has the sudden and unwelcome flashback to James saying those exact words. Covered in blood. An unconscious Snape thrown over his shoulder.

Flick the switch.

Flick the switch .

Flick the—

Regulus tries to make a grab for his wand, left behind on the bench—careless of him—but Sirius blocks his path.

“Come on Reg, it’s just an arm.”

But Regulus just stands there, breathing heavy, stone faced. Shaking. It’s hard to see at first, but they’re closer now, close enough that Sirius can see the tremors in his brother’s hands. And for some reason that’s the moment it really hits him. How afraid Regulus is.

“Holy shit,” he’d been joking. Mostly. He’d thought he’d been joking. “You really did it didn’t you? You really got it?”

Regulus barely flinches. “Go away Sirius.”

He'd been suspicious—the way Regulus went down on the platform, something wasn't right. But he hadn't really let himself think about what it was he was suspicious of. What it would mean to be right.

Flick the switch.

Flick the switch.

Flick the switch.

"I can't believe—" he laughs coldly. "Actually, scratch that, this is just like you isn't it? Tell me, did you thank him after? Get down on the ground and kiss his fucking feet?"

"Fuck you."

"Fuck you right back," Sirius is shouting now, voice bouncing off the empty space around them and he can see Regulus's eyes dart to the door, making sure they're still alone.

"Shy?" he asks with a sneer. "You won't be able to keep that thing a secret forever you know."

Regulus doesn't reply.

"I bet she was so proud of you, her little Reggie. Such a good boy."

"Fuck. You."

He hates Regulus.

Really.

He does.

He hates that Regulus looks like him.

Hates how much of himself he can see in him.

Hates that he used to need him. That having him made that house bearable.

"Tell me Reg, how do you manage to stand without a spine?"

Regulus's eyes grow dark. "You have no idea—"

"I have no idea?" Sirius is shouting again. "I was there Regulus. I was the one she hated, I was the one who stood in front of you. I let her break me into pieces for years for you. And you never did anything! You can't even save your fucking self." He's shaking, a vaguely nauseous feeling drifting over him. By and large he likes to pretend not to remember anything that happened in Grimmauld Place. As though nothing that went on in that house exists in the outside world. He doesn't even talk about it with James really.

"If I could get out," Sirius is breathing heavy. "Then what the fuck is your excuse?"

“Don’t you get it?” Regulus demands, apathy long ago done away with. He’s all cracked open now. All bleeding eyes and desperate hands and a mouth that used to say:

I’m scared.

I’m so scared Sirius.

Flick the switch.

Isn’t this funny?

Isn’t all of this such a fucking joke?

“You got out because of me.”

Sirius blinks, surprised enough to forget how angry he is.

“What?”

“They let you walk away because they had me—you really think that if she didn’t have a spare you would have got off that easy? I paid for your freedom. Me. Your life for mine.”

Sirius shakes his head, swaying slightly, like he’s just been hit. “No—no that’s not right. They let me go because of the Potters, it had nothing to do with you.”

“You really think the Potter’s could have stopped her? You really think they have the power anymore?” when Sirius just stares back at him, lost, Regulus laughs. “You really don’t have a clue what it’s like out there do you?”

He does.

At least, he thought he did.

“There’s no walking away for me,” Regulus goes on coldly. “They’re not letting me out of there, not alive.”

Everything feels suddenly very far away, like Sirius is watching this conversation unfold from somewhere outside his body.

“Better to die than to let them have you,” he says. And even though he means it, and he does, he instantly regrets it.

Regulus looks back at him like he’s just been slapped. “Well,” he manages eventually, and Sirius can’t help but notice the gravel in his voice. “Must be nice not to be the one who has to make that choice.”

He steps around Sirius who makes no attempt to stop him, frozen to the spot, mind moving simultaneously too fast and too slow. Regulus waves his wand, gathering his books and papers into his arms.

“Reg—“ Sirius finally manages to get out.

He’s surprised when Regulus actually stops, looking back at him over his shoulder.

“I didn’t want this,” he isn’t sure what else to say.

Regulus nods, eyes empty. “Sure you did. You’re the hero Sirius. Congratulations.”

That takes the wind out of him. Sirius staggers backwards, collapsing onto the bench as he watches his little brother disappear inside.

He presses the heels of his hands into his eyes and tries to breathe. He always thought Regulus was going to be the good one. Thought he could shield him from everything that he’d been through. Everything that had made him selfish and callous and cruel. He remembers so vividly, watching Regulus get up in front of the whole school, watching the hat drop onto his head, barely there for a second before it announced Slytherin to the entirety of the Great Hall. And all he could feel, at twelve years old, was betrayal. That Regulus had chosen them—after everything Sirius had done—he’d still chosen them. And he’d never stopped. From that day on every time he’d had a choice, Regulus chose them.

I’m scared.

But maybe that wasn’t right. Maybe that wasn’t what happened at all. Maybe Sirius was the one who gave up first. Because he honestly can’t remember the last time he chose Regulus. The last time he stood in front of him. The last time he told him he loved him.

I’m so scared Sirius.

“Fuck,” the word is choked when it comes out of him. He brings his head between his knees and tries to breathe. Tries not to throw-up.

He starts going over every interaction he’s had with Regulus in the last five years. Tries to piece it all together, convince himself that he knows what really happened. But things are blurry. He’s never been very good at telling apart what’s real and what’s not. Spent too much time imagining parts of his life away he suspects.

“Sirius?”

He hears his name but doesn’t look up. Doesn’t want to. Whoever it is can fuck off. Can’t they see he’s in the middle of a mental breakdown here?

“Hey—hey Padfoot are you alright? Pads?”

It takes a minute for the voice to cut through all the noise in his head. He Blinks up at the uncertain figure in front of him.

“Remus?” he croaks.

Remus, because it absolutely is Remus, looks thoroughly uncomfortable. “Hi.”

Sirius lets out a choked laugh, leaning back and trying to scrub the emotion out of his face.

“Hi.”

That’s it. That’s all they have to say to one another. Sirius is too much of a mess to process any of this and Remus looks like he’s desperately fighting the urge to run away.

“You don’t have to do this Remus.”

“I know that,” Remus snaps defensively. And then, after another short pause; “You okay?”

Sirius laughs again, though it’s a bit all over the place, messy and wet and aching. “Always.”

“Always,” Remus repeats, and Sirius can’t read his tone.

There’s more awkward silence, Sirius gradually pulling himself back together. It’s easier with Remus here. Easier to tell what’s real. Easier to ground himself.

Remus clears his throat. “Well, in that case I guess I’ll...go.”

Sirius feels his heart jolt, like someone’s reached into his chest and tried to pull it out.

“Okay,” is all he manages.

Remus nods stiffly, making it all the way to the edge of the courtyard before he stops. Sirius watches his shoulders rise and fall, watches him pause just a moment too long, always one to think things through. Never just moving—not like Sirius—every step Remus takes is intentional. Makes it mean more.

Sirius arches his brow as the other boy turns around and comes to sit next to him on the bench. A safe distance between them, of course.

After a moment Remus sighs; “I can’t just walk away.”

Leave it to Remus to sum up everything Sirius wants to hear in one sentence. Sirius just looks at him. They haven’t spoken since the day in the broom cupboard and Sirius feels his skin itch with the closeness. With the sound of his voice. Sirius would speak—it’s usually his specialty. Except he doesn’t want to do something—anything—that will make Remus go away again.

Eventually the other boy looks at him. “You going to tell me what’s happened?”

Remus is looking at him and Sirius realizes how spoiled he used to be, when he would get this all the time.

“Sirius?”

He blinks, waking up. “Sorry,” he scrubs at his face. “Um—fuck, it was—it was Reg.”

There’s a pause.

“Regulus?”

“Yeah,” he leans forward, elbows on his thighs, hands clasped together. “Remus did I—“ his voice cuts out. He grits his teeth and tries again. “Should I have stayed?”

“Stayed?”

“At Grimmauld.”

“No.”

The answer comes so quickly that it makes Sirius laugh, even if it’s a dried up version of what it usual is.

“Did Regulus say that—that you should have stayed?”

Something warm curls in Sirius’s stomach at the indignation in Remus’s voice. “No,” he shakes his head. “No, he said that I—“ Sirius tries to hold the memory still, but it shakes in his head just like it shook in real life, “that he paid for my freedom.”

Sirius makes himself look at Remus again, his eyes are fierce, they burn so bright, boring into Sirius. Hard to hold. Impossible to let go of.

“I left him there.”

Remus shakes his head. “You had to get out Sirius.”

“I should have taken him with me.”

“It wasn’t exactly planned from what I’ve heard.”

No. That’s certainly true. See, you had to agree to get the mark, that really pissed Walburga off. She’d been assuming that she could just hold him down and carve it into his skin. Then he’d have no choice. He’d have to behave. Have to fall inline. But it turns out that’s not how it works.

“I never went back though.”

“You couldn’t.”

“I was angry at him.”

“You had a right to be.”

Sirius wipes a hand over his face, thinking about the look in Reg’s eyes—he’d never seen him like that before. At least not since they were kids.

“Did I?”

Remus makes a frustrated sound. “Sirius, listen, I—you’ve done a lot of shitty things in your life. But leaving that house was not one of them. Saving yourself isn’t selfish. Sometimes it’s

all you can do. And Regulus,” there’s something resigned about his tone. “I think Regulus is very good at rationalizing things to himself, but you never asked him to be a marauder for you. If that’s the role he wants to play than that’s on him.”

The night Sirius left, he’d been passed out. He was thrown around and sliced open and crucio-ed and eventually, he passed out. Regulus had been there for all of it. He always was. Pale and wide-eyed. He hadn’t told them to stop, hadn’t come forward when Sirius was too weak to get back up. Sirius hadn’t expected him to, but somehow it still hurt when he was proved right.

He regained consciousness alone on the dinning room table. There were voices in the kitchen. He hadn’t paused to think, to come up with a plan. He’d grabbed his wand and left. Bare feet and all.

He hadn’t thought about Regulus as he cut across the lawn, as he’d hobbled down the pavement. Maybe he should have. He doesn’t know.

Eventually Sirius sighs. “It’s so fucking hard for me to talk to him,” he says finally, sitting back. “Every time I tell myself I’m going to do it different. That I’m going to handle things better, but then he opens his mouth and I just feel all this...anger. It’s like I...” he struggles to sort out his thoughts. Eventually he laughs, rubbing his eyes. “It’s like I love him so much I hate him.”

“I mean,” Remus says slowly, “he is your little brother.”

Sirius snorts. “Yeah, I guess. I just wish that—I just wish that life didn’t feel so messy, you know? I always end up losing the thing that matters. I always get caught up in everything else.”

After a while Remus nods. “Yeah.”

They’re just watching one another again. The world disappears with Remus. He always takes up so much space. In Sirius’s head. His chest.

“You’ve been avoiding me,” the other boy says eventually.

Neither of them look away.

Sirius shrugs. “I thought that’s what you wanted?”

“It is,” Remus pulls at the sleeves of his jumper. “It is what I want.”

“Okay.”

But Remus’s face is all screwed-up. Like he isn’t happy with that. Like it’s not quite right. Eventually he lets out a big breath, tearing his eyes away from Sirius and sinking down low, legs sprawling out in front of him, head resting on the back of the bench.

“So do we just do this forever now? Just...orbit around each other?”

“I think that’s kind of up to you.”

An irritated noise comes out of Remus’s mouth. “Well that’s bullshit. This isn’t my fault. I didn’t do it. I don’t know why I have to be the one to figure out how to fix it.”

Sirius feels his chest squeeze. “But you want to?”

“What?” Remus turns his head towards him, eyes big and bright. Those eyes will save me, Sirius thinks, those eyes will carry me home.

He coughs, clearing his throat. “You want to fix this? Us?”

Remus looks surprised, like he’s only just realizing what he said. “I—“ he licks his lips. “I mean, it’s just too hard.”

“Fixing it?”

Remus laughs dryly, pinching the bridge of his nose. “No—being...angry at each other. I feel like I can’t breathe most of the time.”

There are so many things Sirius wants to say. But then, there always are when it comes to Remus.

“Yeah,” is what he goes with in the end, “me too.”

Remus drops his hand, looking about as exhausted at Sirius feels.

“What do you need Moony?” he’s practically whispering. “Just tell me what you need me to do.”

They’re so close—so close to maybe, possibly, getting passed this. Sirius can feel it. For the first time in months no one’s crying or yelling. They’re not fighting. He just needs Remus to tell him how to pull them all the way over, because he’ll do it. He’ll do anything.

Remus is watching him, a careful look in his eyes. Approach with caution, that’s what those eyes say.

“Why did you kiss me Sirius?” he’s whispering now too.

It feels as though someone’s just slammed Sirius into a wall. His whole body tenses, pulse skyrocketing. He tries not to, but he can’t help it—his eyes quickly run the boundaries of the courtyard, making sure they’re still alone. He knows Remus sees. It’s clear in the disappointment that starts clouding his face.

You deserve someone who isn’t afraid to love you back.

He’d said that.

He’d meant it too.

Looking at Remus, glowing in the dim light of the setting sun, all he can think is; beautiful. Remus is always beautiful. Sirius was eleven the first time he thought it. It scared the shit out of him, honestly. The two of them had been lying on Remus's bed, windows open, shirt sleeves half-rolled up, ties torn off. He'd looked over at Remus and before he could help himself he'd just thought: beautiful.

"Sirius?"

He swallows back the ache that crawls up his throat.

He told James that he hadn't listened to his family's bullshit. But he's a liar.

Among other things.

"I don't know," the same answer he's been giving Remus for almost a year. Sirius's voice sounds bruised. "I don't know why I did it."

There's a beat of stillness and then Remus sighs, pulling himself upright. "Okay."

"Remus—"

But the other boy cuts him off with the wave of his hand. Getting back to his feet and straightening out his robes.

"It's fine Sirius. I don't know what I was expecting."

Sirius flinches.

"Look, you can—um," he runs a hand through his blond hair, making it stick out in little puffs, "you can sit with us."

Sirius's eyes widen. "In the Great Hall?"

"And classes," Remus shrugs. "It's fine, okay? I'm tired of trying to pretend I don't see you," he actually smiles a little then, though it's a sad thing. "It never works anyway."

Sirius swallows. "You're sure?"

"Yeah Pads, I'm sure."

He doesn't know what to say to that, something in his chest starting to swell, to press against his ribs at the idea of being let back in. Even slowly. Even just sitting next to him again.

"Thank you," his voice sounds rougher than he's expecting.

Remus just nods. "I'm heading back to the common room, you coming?"

"I think I—" he swallows. "I think I'm gonna stay out here for a bit."

"Sure," Sirius can see the flash of concern in Remus's eyes but he doesn't say anything.

“Remus?” for the second time Remus stops at the edge of the courtyard, turning back to him.
“Are we—are we okay now?”

Something sad flutters across Remus’s face. “No,” he says simply, an ice pick to Sirius’s heart. “We’re just not fighting.”

And then he’s gone.

Chapter End Notes

Hey-o!

I really was going to end this chapter with Remus forgiving Sirius 100% but apparently I just hate happiness. Still, we're getting there. The Prank™ is just so shitty.

Also, if you guys have songs for these characters let me know cause I am currently obsessed with the music people associated with this ship, like I do already have a 5hr long playlist but it could always be longer, y'know?

Y'all are the best, thanks so much for reading!

Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Sometimes, when Regulus is in a good mood, when he feels safe, he'll let James touch him. Not in a sex way—though there is a bit of that too, something in the space between them that cracks and sparks and burns. But these touches are different, they're soft and exploratory and caring. Like James can pull all of Regulus's wounds closed, like he can rub away his scars. Like he can teach him how to love his skin. He can tell that he doesn't, that Regulus and his body have a difficult relationship.

He runs his hands gently through his hair, along the outline of his jaw, his lower lip, he counts the ribs in his chest and circles every one of his knuckles. Worshipping him. Regulus closes his eyes and breathes in deep, slowly letting himself relax. Taking down his walls piece by piece until it's just him—naked even while fully clothed.

"You're obsessed," Regulus's voice is low, rough from lack of use. James isn't sure how long they've been lying here like this. A while, probably.

"With you? Absolutely."

He sees the corner of Regulus's mouth twitch upwards and feels satisfaction purr in his chest before he leans forward and presses a quick kiss to his lips. He likes being able to do that, casually, likes how natural it feels. He's currently drawing small circles on the inside of Regulus's wrist.

"We should probably go back soon."

James makes a noise of protest, something whiny at the back of his throat that makes Regulus laugh, blinking his eyes open and turning to James. All soft and sleepy. This is James's favourite Regulus. I mean, he likes them all, but this one especially.

"You're such a baby, you know that?"

"It's been mentioned." He draws his finger slowly up Regulus's arm making the other boy shiver, eyes fluttering closed again.

"Cheating," Regulus sighs.

When he has good days like this, and this is an exceptionally good day, James realizes just how sensitive Regulus is. The lighter the touch the more it seems to take him apart, untangling all those knots that keep him together.

"I can't cheat if there are no rules."

Regulus snorts. "There are rules. The rules are don't get caught."

“No one can find us here.”

“I wouldn’t put it past Sirius, especially if you don’t come back for the second night this week.”

James’s hand stills, and even though he tries to recover—moving it again a second later—Regulus notices.

“James?”

James doesn’t look at his face, instead he focuses on where his finger is currently moving along the skin just under Regulus’s collar.

“Something you want to tell me?” he can already hear the tension returning to Regulus’s voice.

He sighs, pausing for a moment before letting his hand drop down onto the mattress. “Only if you promise not to freak out.”

Regulus’s eyes narrow. “That doesn’t sound promising.”

“It’s really not a big deal.”

“James, please tell me what’s going on and what it has to do with my brother?”

“Right, sorry,” he says, frowning when Regulus sits up, pulling away from him. “So—er—Sirius might know that I’m seeing someone.”

He can feel the stillness rock through Regulus, like every muscle in his body has just clenched.

“He doesn’t know who,” James goes on quickly, “just knows that it’s some boy.”

“Boy,” Regulus repeats. “He knows you’re seeing a boy?” There’s an edge of panic to Regulus’s voice and James can see him scrambling to pull his walls back up again.

“Reg, it’s okay,” James sits up now too. “He doesn’t care, honestly.”

This does nothing to ease the tension out of Regulus’s expression. He doesn’t respond, just keeps looking at James like he can’t believe he could be so stupid.

“You’re angry at me?” James asks eventually, feeling himself deflate. He really doesn’t want to fight about this.

The tense silence continues, but James can see Regulus chewing on the inside of his cheek, fighting with himself.

“I’m not thrilled,” Regulus manages eventually, which honestly, is a tamer response than James was expecting.

“Really Reg,” he goes on as earnestly as he can manage. “I didn’t give him any details, I just—I needed to tell him something if I was going to keep sneaking off.”

“And it couldn’t have been something a little further from the truth?”

“Not if he was going to believe it.”

Regulus shakes his head, letting out a heavy sigh. “You’re rubbish at keeping secrets James Potter.” But there’s the hint of fondness there that gives James hope.

“I swear he has no idea it’s you.”

“I know he doesn’t, you wouldn’t be here if he did.”

James scrunches up his face. “Sirius doesn’t decide who I can and can’t see.”

Regulus looks at him skeptically but before James can push the matter any further he goes on; “He was okay with it?” there’s a sudden nervousness in his voice that takes James by surprise.

“Okay with it?” James repeats, his brain needing a minute to catch up. “Oh—with me seeing a bloke you mean?”

Regulus nods, and James wonders how much of his life Regulus has spent worrying about Sirius’s reaction to this part of him. It makes his chest ache.

“Very okay with it, yeah, actually he was—” James laughs a little, rubbing at the back of his neck. “He was asking me about you the other day.”

“He was asking about me?” James can’t figure out if Regulus sounds surprised or terrified.

“Well, he didn’t know it was you specifically, but, he was asking about the boy I’m seeing, yeah.”

Regulus sits with that, mind turning behind his eyes. His expression is more serious than James would like it—almost sad. “What did he ask?”

James feels his face heating up. “Er—I don’t know, just…like…stuff.”

“Stuff?” there’s a beat of silence before Regulus’s eyes go wide. “Oh my God, you were talking to my brother about sex.” And then; “Sex with ME. Oh my God.” Regulus’s hands go to his face, shielding it from view. It’s honestly so adorable that for a moment James isn’t sure it’s actually happening.

“Have a little faith in me Reg,” he says, biting back a smile. “I didn’t tell him anything.”

“I don’t believe you,” Regulus says, words muffled.

James can’t help but laugh. “I swear, I didn’t,” he puts his hands up even though Regulus can’t see him. “I just told him that we haven’t, you know, gone all the way. But that I like

what we've been doin—"

James does not get to finish that sentence because at that moment he has a pillow thrown in his face.

"I hate this," Regulus says, but he says it while tackling James onto the bed, so it takes some of the sting out of it.

James laughs again, breathless as Regulus hovers above him, pinning his shoulders down.

"No talking to my brother about sex," Regulus says sternly.

"Have you met Sirius?"

He rolls his eyes. "No talking to my brother about sex with ME."

"But he doesn't know it's you," James teases. "So it doesn't count."

"It counts," Regulus gives him a flat look that slowly grows more serious. "You really shouldn't be talking to him about me at all, okay? It's not—he'll figure it out."

James can feel the tension returning to Regulus's body—honestly, it's a testament to how far they've come that this has gone as well as it has.

"I'm not going to let that happen okay? Not as long as you don't want it to," he brings his hand up to hold Regulus's face, thumb stroking his cheek. "I told him he can't know, he respects that."

Regulus scoffs. "I promise you he doesn't. So just...don't tempt fate, okay?"

"Okay," James lifts himself up just enough to reach Regulus's mouth, kissing it quickly before collapsing back down.

"Honestly," Regulus mutters, shaking his head, "first Lupin now this."

"Yeah I—wait, I'm sorry, what? How do you know about Remus?"

Regulus shrugs, like it's the most casual thing in the world. "We've had words."

James arches his brow. "That sounds ominous."

"It was honestly very civilized for the most part."

"Oh was it?" he laughs. "Was there tea and scones? Did you discuss the weather? Your mother's new hat?"

Regulus rolls his eyes. "You're ridiculous."

"Says the guy who did jello shots off a silver platter."

"That was one time!"

James is laughing again and somehow they end up wrestling, pushing and pulling on one another, rolling around in the gigantic bed. This is it, James thinks as Regulus laughs into the crook of his neck. This is all I want.

“Okay, okay—enough,” Reg is breathless as they part, lying next to one another, Regulus’s hair an absolute mess. It makes James smile.

“You’re in a good mood today,” he says, watching Regulus’s eyes flicker.

Eventually the younger boy rolls towards him. “It’s been a good day.”

And part of James wants desperately to know why, and how he can make all of Regulus’s days good, because he’ll do it. Whatever he needs. But mostly he knows that’s not how it works. That it’s not a fair thing to ask someone—for the answers to themselves. It sounds too much like trying to fix something. He never wants to make Regulus feel like he’s broken.

“I’m glad,” James says eventually voice quiet.

They stay like that, silently for a minute, before James starts to smile again.

“You ready for the party?”

Regulus groans, rolling onto his back. “Merlin, don’t remind me, Evan’s been obsessing over it for weeks.”

There’s a seventh year Slytherin—Corban Yaxley—who discovered in his third year at Hogwarts that he and the Bloody Baron have the same birthday. He therefore declared it a house wide holiday. So every year the entirety of Slytherin house celebrates, the bold kids skiving off classes, the bolder kids going to class already drunk. As much as James dislikes Slytherin, he does have to hand it to Yaxley, he knows how to get people to party. And James can always appreciate a little mindless chaos.

“He’s making some kind of special punch,” Regulus goes on, wrinkling his nose. “I can only imagine what’s going to be in that.”

James smiles, “You gonna get wasted and then sneak up to the astronomy tower and kiss me?”

Regulus rolls his eyes, though the tops of his cheeks do turn a shade of pink that warms James’s chest. “I don’t know, are you going to have a panic attack when I do?”

James shrugs. “Might. Depends on how good the kiss is.”

“All my kisses are excellent. I promise you quality will not be an issue.”

“Oh yeah?” James’s eyes are bright, staring intently at Regulus as he inches closer. “Prove it.”

There’s no reason for Regulus’s chest to hitch, no reason for him to look at James the way he does then—like they haven’t already kissed for hours. But he does, rolling back onto his side,

hand reaching out so he can run a knuckle down the side of James's face.

"If you insist," Regulus whispers, breath warm. "But you have to promise me you'll remember to breathe."

James smiles, "Promise."

Regulus's hand slides to the back of James's head, pulling him forward, taking his mouth. And James lets him. Again. And again.

This is it.

This is all I want.

James sits against the headboard of his bed, tossing a Snitch up and down. He really should keep track of these things, eventually Hooch is going to realize she's missing a dozen of them. Maybe more honestly. He's technically supposed to be doing transfiguration homework but he's in too good a mood to focus on school. He's been riding the high of the night before all day. It had just been so...good. So warm and soft and happy. He smiles just thinking about it, hand curling around the cold metal in his palm, feeling the vibration of the Snitch's wings.

"What'd you get for question six James?" Remus is on the floor, notes and textbooks spread around him.

"Uh..." James looks down at his blank parchment.

"I got Acromantula Venom," Peter says from his own bed. He has one quill behind his ear and another in his hand. There are a plethora of parchment and books surrounding him too, though in a somewhat less organized fashion. Both Remus and James turn to look at him.

"You got...Acromantula Venom...for number six?" Remus asks slowly, as though certain he's misheard.

"Yeah, is that wrong?"

James can't help the laugh that comes out of his mouth but Remus, if anything, just looks concerned.

"You got Acromantula Venom—a very rare potions ingredient—for the question: what are the limits of transfiguration?"

"Okay, I'm getting the sense that that is definitely not the answer?" Peter's eyes bounce from Remus to James, the latter is practically in hysterics at this point.

"How did you even—"

But at that moment the door to their room is thrown open and Sirius waltzes in, throwing his book bag on the ground and staring at the rest of them with a look in his eyes that can only

mean trouble.

“Lads,” he stands in front of the window, which really adds to the drama of the situation, hands on his hips, long hair let loose. “I have just created the best charm of all time and I know exactly what to do with it.”

James lets the Snitch in his hand fly off as he slides closer to the edge of his bed. “Go on then?” he asks, intrigued.

“I thought we were doing transfiguration homework,” Remus mutters bitterly, looking very determinedly at his textbooks and not at Sirius.

“This is better,” Sirius says, clearly excited enough to ignore the obvious tension between him and Remus. “Pete, get off your bed.”

“What?” Peter asks surprised.

“Off. You. Now.”

Peter reluctantly climbs off his bed and Sirius immediately whips out his wand, pointing it at the aforementioned piece of furniture and making three swift slashes.

“Sternius Rem Tactus.”

All of them stare, waiting for something to happen. Nothing does.

“Er,” James rubs the back of his neck. “Never thought I’d say this, but I think transfiguration homework might actually be better than this.”

Remus laughs, but Sirius doesn’t look the least bit deterred.

“Go on Pete, back on the bed, hop to it.”

Peter narrows his eyes skeptically. “Do I look like an idiot?”

Sirius arches his brow. “Do you want me to answer that?”

“Oh fuck you.”

“Buy me dinner first and then we’ll talk.”

Peter proceeds to go an alarming shade of magenta, quickly looking away from Sirius.

“Leave him alone Sirius,” Remus says flatly, still not looking up from his coursework. Sirius turns to him, a mildly stung expression on his face. Truth be told, James has no idea what’s going on with the two of them anymore. Remus has started to be okay with sharing the same space as Sirius, but they still don’t really...talk much. Not to each other and not to James and Peter. All James can get out of them is “we’re fine” “we’re not fighting anymore” which are both, clearly, lies.

Eventually Sirius tears his eyes away from Remus and back to Peter, who has inched his way carefully closer to his bed.

“What’s it gonna do?” Pete asks.

“What makes you think it’s going to do anything?”

“Six years of friendship.”

That brings a grin to Sirius’s face. “It’s nothing bad, I promise.”

Peter does not look at all convinced. “You get on it then.”

“Peter, what did I just tell you about buying me dinner first?”

Peter rolls his eyes. “Listen, there is no way in hell that I’m—“

Tired of the bickering, James reaches over and gives Peter a shove, sending him stumbling into his bed. The end of the mattress immediately lifts off the frame, knocking Peter onto the ground and making what almost looks like a mouth and then it...it...sneezes? A gust of dust blows out towards Sirius after what definitely sounds like an “achoo” before the mattress falls back down into place.

Sirius grins, wiping the dust off his robes and fixing his hair. “Brilliant, right?”

“What the hell was that?” Peter demands, getting back to his feet.

“I’m with Pete,” James says, swinging himself off his own bed and stepping closer to get a better look.

“You modified the Sternius charm,” Remus says, drawing all of their attention to him, he’s still sitting on the floor, parchments slightly ruffled from the mattress. He blinks, before looking up at Sirius, “to work on inanimate objects?”

Sirius nods, grin growing slightly sheepish. “And to respond to touch instead of just going off continuously.”

Remus looks a little dazed. “That’s—that kind of spell modification is—is extremely advanced.”

Sirius just shrugs. “I was bored.”

If it weren’t for the fact that Remus was already on the floor James would be worried he was about to swoon.

“You were bored,” Remus says distantly, like he can’t quite believe it, the pair of them still staring at one another. It’s the longest eye contact James has seen them make in ages.

“Sorry to interrupt,” he says, causing them both to start. “But what’s the Sternius charm?”

“Sneezing charm,” Sirius says, mischief returning to his eyes. “Used in duels to distract your opponent, I modified it to work on objects and then to respond to touch.”

James smiles back, “wicked.”

“Ah, but that’s not the wickedest part. Do you know what tonight is Prongs?”

“Did I forget your birthday again?”

“You’ve never forgotten my birthday.”

“Really? Cheers to me then.”

Sirius bites his lower lip, trying to stay in character. “Use that deer brain of yours, it’ll come to you.”

And it does.

“Bloody Baron’s party,” he’s starting to smile now too.

“I already hate where this is going,” Remus says flatly, but Sirius and James only have eyes for each other.

“We wait until they’re all smashed and then we sneak in and—“

Sirius is interrupted by the sound of Peter’s bed sneezing again.

“Pete, what the hell?” James asks, trying not to laugh as he helps his friend back up off the floor.

“I thought it might have worn off,” he says sulkily, rubbing his shoulder.

“Oh no, it’s got a lifespan of at least twelve hours,” Sirius says, as though it ought to have been obvious.

“Twelve hours!” Peter repeats outraged. “Jesus, what’s the counter-charm?”

Sirius shrugs. “Don’t have one. Didn’t have time.”

“You cursed my bed without—“

“Sh, sh, sh,” Sirius holds out his hand, cooing at him like he’s an overexcited toddler. “Not important right now. What is important, is that you lot learn the charm so that we can sneak into the Slytherin dormitories and curse all their beds while they’re getting sloshed.”

“Yes!” James says, at the same time that Remus says, “Absolutely not.”

“Oh come on Remus,” James turns to him pleadingly. “We haven’t pulled anything in ages.”

Remus looks back at him, unmoved. “If you wanna go act like idiots be my guest, I’m not going to stop you. I’m just saying, I’m not interested.”

“It’ll be fun,” James pushes, feeling suddenly desperate to have the four of them back together again, acting like they always have.

“It’s juvenile.”

“Exactly!”

Remus rolls his eyes, picking up his quill and going back to his transfiguration homework. James looks to Sirius for help, usually convincing Remus to do stupid things is his forte. But, of course, he realizes as their eyes meet that Sirius can’t be that person anymore.

Sighing, James stares down at Remus, trying to decide on the best course of action. Eventually he walks over and proceeds to get down on the floor and physically lie across Remus’s notes.

“Ugh—James!”

He looks up at his friend, brow arched. “Come on Moons, come be an idiot with us.”

He sees a flicker in Remus’s armour, the first crack. He really is a lot like Regulus sometimes, even more than Sirius.

“I’m just going to lie here until you say yes, so if you don’t want McGonagall to tear into you for not getting the homework done, it’s really in your best interest to agree.”

Remus snorts. “Please, I’d tell her what happened and she’d give me a biscuit and a pat on the back.”

“Teacher’s pet.”

“Every other teacher is obsessed with you, let me have McGonagall.”

“You two really do have a weird connection.”

“It’s called exasperation.”

James smiles and, to his delight, Remus smiles back. He reaches out and pokes Remus’s knee. “Pwetty Pwease?”

Remus rolls his eyes. “Yes, fine, alright. But only because you look so pathetic.”

James’s smile widens. “You’re my favourite, I ever tell you that?”

“Oi! What about me?” Sirius cuts back in and James turns to him as he pulls himself off the floor.

“You’re my favourite too.”

“Can’t have more than one favourite Prongs, then you’re just being greedy.”

“Watch me,” James scoffs, dusting himself off. “So, what’s the plan?”

They have to practice the spell for almost two hours before they're all able to get it right. They don't try it on anymore beds—one of them being bed-less is more than enough—instead they practice on the bar of soap in the bathroom, on one of James's trainers, on a sock. Eventually most of the items in their room seem to have developed allergies.

"I still can't believe you charmed my bloody bed," Peter grumbles every few minutes, earning him a series of increasingly exasperated apologies from Sirius.

They decide it makes most sense to split up: Remus and James will take the invisibility cloak and charm the beds in the boys' rooms, while Peter, as a rat, and Sirius, using a Disillusionment Charm, will take the girls'. They're focusing on the fifth, sixth, and seventh years. For time purposes mostly. Though Remus also staunchly refuses to prank eleven year olds. Something about scarring them for life.

"You have the password for the common room?" James asks.

Sirius grins. "I do. Turns out Madelyn Avery thinks I'm very charming."

"Uh-huh. And the girl's dorm? How're you gonna get up there?"

Sirius arches his brow. "I told you, Madelyn Avery thinks I'm very charming."

Remus clears his throat and the smug look on Sirius's face quickly disappears.

James is honestly buzzing. The four of them, working together, plotting against Slytherin, it feels right. Falling back into something well-known and comfortable. And sure, it's not exactly the same—Remus and Sirius are still a bit...off with one another, but it's close. It was hard, last year, this summer, but things are getting better. Things are good, even.

"You warn Regulus about this?" Remus whispers as they make their way towards the Slytherin common room. Sirius and Peter just up ahead, every once and a while, if James focuses on the right spot, he can see the outline of Sirius's shoulder or hand, spelled to perfectly blend with his surroundings.

"Like I would ever compromise the integrity of a prank like that. Honestly Remus, I'm insulted you would even ask."

Remus snorts. "Good to know some things never change." James wants to ask him what things have changed but doesn't get the chance; "He going to be mad about this?"

James considers it for a moment. "I don't know, he has a better sense of humour than you'd think."

"Considering I don't think he has any sense of humour, I'm sure that's true."

James looks over at Remus and then straight ahead again. He still forgets sometimes, how little people know Regulus.

They can already hear the music coming from the Slytherin common room and James wonders how the hell they get away with this without a silencing charm.

“Do you think Slughorn ever enforces any rules?” Remus asks, as if reading James’s mind. “Or is he too busy kissing each and every one of their asses?”

James snickers, the entrance to the common room coming into view. He’s always found the Slytherin entrance to be the most boring—just a stretch of blank wall, leading to a passage.

“Ready lads?” Sirius asks, voice seemingly coming out of nowhere.

It’s midnight, so they’re hoping that everyone inside is already too drunk or too busy to notice anything strange, like self opening doors for example.

“Hell yeah we are,” James says, and doesn’t need to see Sirius’s face to know that he’s grinning.

“Remember the plan, get in, fuck their shit up, get out, meet back at our room. Got it?”

“It’s a complicated plan but somehow I think we’ll manage to remember it,” Remus says dryly.

Sirius laughs. “Ah, that’s what I love about you Moony, so bloody clever.”

James is glad that Sirius can’t see the way that makes Remus go stiff.

“Alrighty then,” there’s the sound of shuffling and then; “Jormungand,” Sirius whispers. And the wall opens.

There are very clear differences between Gryffindor and Slytherin parties, the first being the lighting. Currently, the whole Slytherin common room is being lit only by the jellyfish someone has charmed to come to the windows, each of them glowing a different colour. James wonders if that’s painful for them—if they can feel it? Can jellyfish feel things? There’s just something about turning living things into inanimate objects that gives him the creeps.

Slytherin also has crap taste in music. Right now they’re playing something with a heavy bass, instrumental but not classical. James doesn’t recognize it but it’s making his ears bleed.

“Jesus,” he mutters as he tries to see his way through a crowd of people all wearing unhelpfully dark clothing, in an already unhelpfully dark room, “what’s the dress code for this thing? Coffin casual?”

“Pretty sure this is how they always dress,” Remus says, sounding no more impressed.

James isn't really looking for Regulus—tonight is about the marauders—besides, he doesn't need to get distracted. But somehow, through the chaos and darkness, he finds him. He feels it in his whole body when he sees him, a tingling sensation running along his bones. James is about ready to choke on his disparaging comments about the fashion at this party because shit, funeral chic looks good on Reg.

He's sitting in the corner, surrounded by people who seem to be talking around him more than to him and yet he's definitely at the centre. His perfect posture has gone out the window, he's slouched down but in a confident—I don't give a fuck about you—kind of way, drink held lazily in his hand, black button up undone to an obscene degree.

"Fuck," the word punches out of James before he can control himself.

Remus looks over at him. "You okay?"

"What? Yeah—stubbed my toe."

Remus raises his brow before looking down at the clear ground, completely free of toe stubbing objects.

"Oh look, there are the dorm rooms," James says quickly, nudging Remus in their direction and very purposefully not looking back at Regulus.

They stumble their way up a flight of stairs and then down a long dark hallway, doing their best to avoid the shadowy clusters of people clinging to the corners and walls. Luckily for them, the door to the fifth year dorm is open so they don't need to worry about surprising anyone.

"Merlin," Remus mutters, after they make sure the room is empty. "Is there anywhere in this place that doesn't feel like an evil lair?"

James snorts, casting a quick Colloportus on the door. Remus turns to him, brow raised.

"You don't think it's going to be suspicious if they come up here and find their door locked?"

James shrugs. "I'd rather they be suspicious than walk right in and find us. This way we get under the cloak first and they just think the door was jammed."

"That's actually...pretty smart."

James laughs. "Always so surprised."

He steps further into the room, taking it in. Remus isn't wrong, it definitely feels like the type of place someone plotting world domination would hangout in. The rest of the dungeon is made of grey stone but these rooms have walls of black—it might be some kind of marble, James can't tell. The walls are broken up by arched alcoves that let beams of green light drift in from the water overtop of them.

"Alright, lets do this and go," Remus says, moving towards the beds. "This place gives me the creeps."

James smirks, doing the same. He gets through the first bed just fine, but on the second one he stalls.

It wouldn't have occurred to him that it was Regulus's—there are no posters on the walls around it, no real identifying markers—except for the chest at the end, R.A.B penned out in gold on the lid. Sirius used to have one just like it, until last year. It got left behind with everything else he owned.

It's always weird, the ways in which Sirius and Regulus are so connected and so disconnected all at the same time. James runs his fingers along the initials, along the perfectly made bed, the tiny telescope on Regulus's bedside table. He smiles a little at the sight of it.

Almost of its own volition his hand wanders down to the table drawer, pulling it open despite the voice in his head shouting that this is boundary crossing territory. But there isn't much in there, not that James was expecting there to be. A few quills, a small book on potions, rings, and—James pauses, fingers brushing against a piece of parchment. Shoved far to the back, clearly not meant to be seen. Be read. And he knows. He knows that he should leave it alone. But he's never been very good at that.

It's a letter, he realizes when he pulls it out.

It's his letter.

The page is soft, the lines of the folds well worn, clearly something that is frequently read. That thought makes James ache. It's the last one he wrote, and because of the dark it takes him a few seconds to realize that Regulus has written comments in margins.

'Dude'

James had written, and next to it, scribbled in neat cursive, Regulus replied:

'This is an indignity I do not deserve.'

James snorts.

A little further down James had said: 'I can't decide which I like better, us on the same team, or us on opposing teams.'

'Opposing,' Regulus scribbled beside it. 'Obviously Potter, we're born rivals.'

Most of the comments are like that, witty, cute. The words "our house" have been underlined and circled, though James isn't entirely sure why. But it's the note at the very bottom of the letter that catches his attention—that stands out as different from the rest.

James had written: 'I just want you to know that I'll be there if you need me. I'll always be there.'

It looks like Regulus wrote something and then scribbled it out, but next to the blackened words there are several lines that, after reading through them twice, James realizes aren't Reg's. They're quotes:

‘Everything is more beautiful because we’re doomed,’ starts the first one, ‘you will never be lovelier than you are now. We will never be here again.’

And then, just below it:

‘No man or woman born, coward or brave, can shun his destiny.’

James reads them over again, the words swelling inside him, foreboding and sad. He wonders when Regulus wrote them—hopes it was before he came back. That it was when he was still stuck in Scotland. Where James couldn’t reach him. Because these words sound like...

They sound like giving up.

But he quickly shoves that thought aside. He’d been with Regulus last night, and Regulus had been—he’d been happy. He’d been having a good day. Just a few more of those and maybe James would finally get Regulus to see that life doesn’t have to be so fucking hard. That him and James can have more than secrets in the middle of the night.

“Alright?”

James jumps at the sound of Remus’s voice, quickly throwing the letter back in the drawer and slamming it shut.

“Er, yeah,” he turns around, putting on a smile. “Next dorm?”

Remus arches his brow and then, after a brief pause; “It’ll be suspicious if his bed is the only one not charmed.”

“What?” James asks, still reeling, but then he follows Remus’s gaze to Regulus’s bed. “Oh, yeah, sorry,” he quickly waves his wand casting the spell. “Okay great, should we go?”

“You sure you’re okay?” Remus asks, still looking at James skeptically.

“Uh-huh, never better,” he starts walking towards the door.

“Um...James?”

James looks at him over his shoulder.

“Think you might be forgetting something?” he nods to the cloak hanging out of James’s back pocket.

“Oh,” James says dumbly. “Right, yeah.”

He holds it out and Remus steps closer to him, the pair of them disappearing.

“You sure you’re alright?” Remus whispers as they unlock the door and slip back outside.

“Absolutely.”

The sixth year dorm is pretty uneventful and they get through it quickly, the noise below them growing louder and rowdier as time passes.

“You think Slughorn will make them all hangover potions in the morning?” Remus asks as they make it to the last room. This one is way messier than the other two—as though their disorganization is beyond even house-elf help.

“That or Snape will, you know what a little suck-up he is.”

Remus only nods as they move further into the room. Since last year he always goes a bit stiff at the mention of Snape. At the sight of him. He’s afraid that Dumbledore’s word won’t be enough, that Snape will decide to tell people his secret anyway. The worst part, is that James thinks Remus probably should be worried.

“Ooh, sweet,” he pulls a full bottle of some kind of fancy liqueur out of the pile of clothes beside one of the beds. “French,” he mutters to himself as he tries and fails to read the label, deciding to open it anyway. “Why is everything these wankers drink French?”

“I think your choice of adjective answers that question,” and then, when he sees what James is doing; “—no James, you can’t just drink from some random bottle you found on the floor,” Remus sounds thoroughly exasperated.

James only grins. “You think it’s a plant? That they knew we were coming all along? Left us a poisoned bottle of...whatever the fuck this is?”

Remus clearly does not appreciate James’s sarcastic tone. “I think it’s a bad idea to put unknown substances in your mouth.”

“Ooh, I love it when you talk dirty to me,” James winks as he brings the bottle to his mouth and takes a swig. The liquid is thick and syrupy and grossly sweet, but definitely alcoholic. That’s all that matters in the end.

James makes a face as he finishes, holding the bottle out to Remus.

“Yeah, no thank you, I’m fine,” his friend says, eyeing the bottle with distaste.

James shakes it at him. “C’mon, you know you want to.”

“I definitely don’t know that. Can we just get this done?”

James doesn’t drop the bottle, and after several moments of a very determined staring contest, Remus surrenders. “Honestly, between you and Sirius—bloody children,” he grabs the bottle out of James’s hand and takes an impressively large gulp for someone who was so against it.

“Happy now?” Remus doesn’t even flinch, wiping his mouth off on the back of his hand.

“Wow, how did you do that?” James asks as he accepts the bottle that Remus is shoving back towards him.

“Do what?” Remus starts charming the beds.

“Take that without even flinching?”

Remus shrugs. “I’m a better drinker than you are.”

“What?” James laughs. “Since when?”

Remus gives him a sidelong look, moving on to the next bed. “Since always.”

James narrows his eyes. “No, that can’t be right, why don’t I know this?”

“Because usually you’re too drunk to notice.”

“I don’t get that drunk,” though he’s not entirely sure how confident he feels about that statement. I mean, he certainly has gotten drunk. Once or twice. Or three or five or twenty times.

“You and Sirius, Hogwarts’s resident bad boys, under the table after a couple of beers.”

That gets a laugh out of James. “Oof, don’t hold back Moony, tell me how you really feel.”

Remus shoots him a guilty look. “Sorry, that sounded bitter didn’t it?”

“Like a lemon,” James smiles.

“That’s sour not—you know what? Never mind,” Remus sighs, leaning against the bedpost next to him. “I don’t want to be a lemon.”

He says it so sincerely that James has to bite down on his lip to keep from laughing. “Aw shucks Moons, don’t look like that, you’re not a lemon—maybe a lemon meringue.”

He wrinkles his nose. “That’s a terrible desert.”

“Personally, I like meringues.”

That gets a huff of laughter out of Remus. “Is there anything you don’t like?”

James makes a face, voice grave. “Beets.”

“Fair enough,” Remus’s smile flickers and then goes out, hand coming up to scrub at his face. “I feel like I’m making everything harder on everyone,” he says finally. And then, before James can respond, he reaches out and takes the bottle back, swallowing another gulp.

“Remus,” James says, more sincere than he’s been all night, “you’re not making anything harder.”

“Please, you and Sirius are alright now, and Pete, well, he’ll do whatever you do won’t he—“

“I don’t think that’s exactly—“

“—so it’s me who’s stopping things from being...normal. And it’s not that I don’t want them to be, I do.”

“I know mate.”

There’s a pause, Remus biting on his lower lip before he laughs, though it sounds kind of sad. He drinks again before speaking. “I’m not even angry anymore, I’m just...scared.” Remus closes his eyes for a moment and James feels his heart clench. “I’m scared of him. It—“ he exhales, breath shaky, “it hurt so much.”

“I know,” James says again.

Remus’s eyes blink open. “I can’t do that again. I can’t let him in and then—and that’s not even touching on all the rest of it.”

James arches his brow. “The rest of it?”

Remus smiles dryly. “The kissing.”

“Ah,” James says wisely, taking the bottle back and failing, once again, not to grimace as the alcohol goes down his throat. “The kissing. He still being a prick about that?”

Remus frowns. “I don’t know, I don’t know what he’s doing.” And then, after a moment. “Regulus isn’t...the same?” The sentence comes out stilted, like he can’t find the words—doesn’t know how to ask it.

James thinks about it, tilting his head from side to side. “It’s still...there...the fear. I don’t think he’s particularly happy about being...”

“Gay?”

“Yeah,” James rubs at the back of his neck. “But I think he’s kind of accepted it—been forced to accept it—as a part of himself.”

“Forced?”

Anger and pain cut through him and he feels his hand tighten around the bottle he’s still holding. “Yeah,” he coughs, clearing his throat. “You get all of them?” he gestures to the beds, eager to change the subject.

Remus blinks. “What—oh,” he looks around. “Yeah, yeah think so.”

James nods. “Alright, lets get out of here shall we?” he takes a final swig from the bottle before tossing it on the floor. Fuck the French bastards.

“Merlin yes,” Remus agrees eagerly as James throws the invisibility cloak back over the pair of them.

“Hey, Remus?” he says before they push out the door. He waits for his friend’s stare to meet his. “You’re not a lemon.”

Remus smiles, rolling his eyes. “Yeah, yeah, just go already.”

Things have grown slightly wilder since they went upstairs. People are getting sloppy, no longer able to maintain their “cool” outer facades. There’s a lot of grinding and spilling and shouting over the—still terrible—music.

There are also a lot fewer paths through the crowd. Remus and James do their best to stay out of people’s way but it’s near impossible at this point.

“Jesus,” James hisses, “the whole bloody school is here.”

“Certainly seems like it,” Remus grumbles, pushing James to the side so that they miss the swinging arm of a girl emphatically pointing at something across the room.

“Ohmygod, ohmygod, ohmygod!” she yanks on her friend’s arm. “Look!”

James doesn’t really pay the girl any attention, too busy looking for their next opening in the crowd. At least, he doesn’t until approximately three seconds later when Remus says the same words but in an entirely different tone of voice.

“Oh my God.”

James looks over at him, finding his friend’s gaze directed across the room, in the direction the girl had been pointing. “What’s up?” he asks.

“James—“

But it’s too late, because James is already looking. It’s slightly pathetic that the first thing he feels is still butterflies. That jolt of dopamine that he always gets when he looks at Regulus. It takes his brain a moment to catch up to what he’s actually looking at.

“James,” Remus whispers beside him, tugging lightly on his sleeve like he’s trying to pull him away, to get him to stop staring. But he can’t. Can’t move. Can’t look away.

“What?” he hears himself say. Everything suddenly feels like it’s moving very slowly, like he’s in a dream. A dream where he’s watching Regulus kiss some girl, which—which isn’t right. Why would he—why would he do that?

Except it’s not just a kiss. Because they’re still going. Regulus’s hand on the back of her head, the other on her lower back.

“Oh fuck,” James says as it all speeds up again, as it really sinks in. A sharp pain nearly cuts him in half, causing him to double over and grab hold of his knees. He feels dizzy.

“I think I might be sick,” the words come out of him without his permission, and he tries to remind himself that there’s nothing actually physically wrong with him. He’s fine. He’s fine. He’s totally fine.

“Come on James, come on, lets go.”

Remus wraps his arm around him, pulling him up and forward and James lets him. Somehow they make it into the corridor outside, and James knows that he should wait, that they need to get further away from the common room before they become visible again. But he can't breathe.

He pulls away—away from Remus and away from the cloak, barely making it around the corner before he needs to stop and grab onto something for support. He presses his palms into the cold stone of the dungeon and hangs his head. It's not long before Remus catches up to him. He doesn't say anything, just leans on the wall next to him.

“I didn't—“ his voice shakes and he forces himself to breathe in and out before speaking again. “I didn't see that coming,” he manages eventually, in what is probably the most obvious statement he's ever made.

“No,” Remus agrees, “me neither.”

There's a pause.

“He's probably drunk,” Remus says eventually.

And James has to grit his teeth against the pathetic noise that wants to come out of his mouth. The “he was drunk the first time he kissed me” that's sitting on his tongue.

“It looked like he meant it,” is what comes out instead.

“It looked like he was snogging some girl at a party. Don't read more into it James, not until you talk to him.”

James laughs, even though it feels wrong in his mouth. Finally, he lifts his head. “You don't want me to be with him.”

It's not a question but Remus still answers. “No.”

“So why are you being so...fair.”

“Because,” he says simply, “what I really want is for you to be happy and, despite all reason and good judgement, he makes you happy. I've seen it.”

James has to close his eyes for a minute to weather the new wave of nausea that comes with that statement. “Yeah,” he says quietly. “Yeah, he does.”

“But just so we're clear,” James opens his eyes just in time to see Remus's expression go from sympathetic to murderous in one blink. “Any good faith he had managed to build with me is now gone. And the next time I see that scrawny little twerp I'm going to ruin his fucking life.”

James laughs, running a hand over his face, feeling shaky and sweaty and all other kinds of awful.

“He’s not really scrawny.”

Remus rolls his eyes. “I can’t believe that’s what you got from that.”

James smiles weakly, leaning his head back against the wall and exhaling. “Fuck,” he says again, and then; “I should have had more of that posh alcohol. I’m too sober for this.”

“We have alcohol back at the dorm. Speaking of, we should get going before the other two think a rescue mission is in order.”

James sighs pulling himself off the wall. He looks back in the direction of the Slytherin common room, feeling something tug on him, like a string attached to his bellybutton, pulling him backwards, back to Reg. Because he just wants to see him. To touch him. To remember that he’s his.

His person.

“Fuck.”

“You’re going to have to stop saying that or Sirius is going to ask questions,” Remus says.

“Sorry,” James scrubs at his eyes. “I just—I just really didn’t—I don’t know what to do with—with that.”

Remus nods. “You’ll talk to him. You’ll figure it out one way or the other. I know how much—” Remus’s voice gets high so he stops, clearing his throat. “I know how much that hurts.”

James looks at him and realizes, suddenly, how true that is. How many times Remus has had to standby and watch Sirius snog some girl.

“Come on,” he nudges James with his elbow. “We gotta go before the sneezing starts.”

Sirius is wired when they get back to the dorm. Which makes sense, first prank of the year, they got all the senior Slytherins, ruined their big night. All and all, a major success. He should celebrate. Normally, James would be right there with him. But instead he feels numb. Disconnected from all of it.

“Okay, what’s going on with you?”

James blinks. Sirius is staring straight at him, Peter sitting on the bed next to him since his own is still out of commission.

“Sorry,” James drags a hand through his hair and offers up a sheepish smile. “Just tired.”

“Tired?” Sirius repeats, gobsmacked. Like he’s never heard the word before. “You’re—”

“I am too honestly,” Remus quickly cuts in, and James silently thanks him.

He watches Sirius's eyes bounce between the pair of them, the surprise slowly morphing into disappointment. And James hates it, hates that this is the first time they've really felt like the marauders—like a team—in ages, and he's ruining it.

"Okay," Sirius says finally. "Sure—er—guess we'll call it a night then."

"Hey," James knocks Sirius's foot with his own, "tomorrow okay? We'll celebrate tomorrow, after we see all their miserable faces at breakfast."

That brings some semblance of joy back to Sirius's expression.

"God, it's going to be brilliant."

James gives him a tight smile before pulling himself fully onto his bed and shutting the curtains. He doesn't bother to get undressed.

He listens to the murmured voices of Peter and Sirius. To the eventual sounds of each of his roommates going in and out of the bathroom, getting ready for bed. Listens to Remus's hushed voice as he spells the lights out. And all the while he just lays there on his back, staring up at the canopy over his head. Somehow thinking and not thinking at the same time.

He feels like he has too much energy. Like it's pressing against his skin—pushing, pushing, pushing. He can't shut his mind off. Every time he closes his eyes he's back in that room and he's staring at Regulus and Regulus is holding that girl. Holding her like he means it. And she's touching him.

James's skin feels too hot.

Don't read more into it, that's what Remus said. Except Remus doesn't know Regulus, he thinks he's like Sirius but he isn't. He isn't, and so James just can't make sense of it. He demands answers from his brain but it just sparks and fizzles and restarts.

His skin feels too hot. His ribs feel too tight.

He tries to remember what the girl looked like, tries to figure out if he knows her. If he's seen Regulus with her before. Scours his head for any memory of Regulus mentioning her, but nothing in his brain is working right. Every thought he has is interrupted by that image of Regulus snogging someone else.

His skin feels too hot. His ribs feel too tight. His head feels too loud.

"Fuck this," he hisses, ripping the curtains of his bed back and getting to his feet. He slips on his trainers, grabbing the invisibility cloak from the chair he'd tossed it onto and heading for the door.

"James don't," he looks up to see Remus getting out of bed.

“I can’t do this,” James whispers. “I can’t just sit here. I need to—to know what the fuck is going on.”

“Wait until tomorrow—“

“I can’t!”

“What are you going to do James? Just storm in there and kidnap him?”

“I don’t know,” he really doesn’t, he has no plan whatsoever. He just needs to do something. He just needs to see Regulus, to have him explain.

“This isn’t just regular stupid, you do realize that right?” Remus whispers angrily. “I mean, just wandering in there on any given night would be an incredibly stupid thing to do, but after we just fucked with them? If they find you they’ll tear you apart.”

James is unmoved. “I can handle a few angry Slytherins.”

“Can he?”

That question manages to pull James up short. He opens and closes his mouth, willing an answer to come, but before any does Sirius and Peter are blinking up at them.

“What the hell?” Peter demands, rubbing his sleep heavy eyes.

“I thought you two were tired?” Sirius adds, he doesn’t look...angry, necessarily, just...confused. His eyes bounce between Remus and James before they land on the invisibility cloak in James’s hand.

“Ah,” Sirius says, like he’s just figured something out. “Going to see the boy.”

“The boy?” Peter repeats. “What boy? Who’s the boy?”

Remus looks at both of them and then, apparently deciding that that’s too much of a mess to sort out right now, turns his attention back to James.

“I get it, okay? I do, but this is not the right way to do this—the right time.”

“I’m going fucking insane here Moons,” and he can hear it in his voice. Hear the desperation.

“I—“

“Moony, let him go have his fun, what’s the big deal?”

Remus grits his teeth, not looking at Sirius. “It’s not that simple.”

“I’m sorry, I’m still confused, who is this boy?” Peter looks around at all of them.

“Now that Petey, is the thousand galleon question,” Sirius says, tapping the side of his nose.

James just shakes his head, too tired to take in the ridiculousness of his current situation.

“Okay, I’m going.”

“NO! James, I swear to God you can be such a fucking bullheaded idiot sometimes,” Remus grabs hold of his wrist and yanks him back into the room.

“Remus,” James says as calmly as he can manage, which, to be honest, at this moment is not particularly calmly, “let go.”

“You’re going to get yourself hurt. You’re going to get both of you hurt.”

“Remus, mate, you’re being a little much yeah?” Sirius sounds uncertain for the first time. “They’ve been doing this for a year now, I think they’ve got it figured out.”

“Who’s been doing what for a year!?” Peter shouts at the same moment that Remus rounds on Sirius.

“Will you please shut-up? You literally have no idea what you’re talking about!”

Which, surprisingly, does shut Sirius up. At least for a second. “Wait—hold on—do you know?”

Remus instantly stiffens and James can feel his stomach start to roll, bile crawling up the back of his throat.

“You do don’t you?” and now he’s angry. “You know who he is!”

James sees the second lightbulb go off in Sirius’s head, he’s too clever by half really, always has been. This time he turns to James when he speaks; “Is he in Slytherin?”

“Is who in—“

But James doesn’t stick around for the onslaught of questions. Somewhere in the midst of the drama Remus let his grip slip and James takes full advantage, pushing himself through the door, down the stairs and back into the castle.

He has no idea what time it is at this point. Three in the morning? Four? Somewhere around there. The Slytherin common room has significantly calmed down. There are maybe a dozen people still around, half of whom are passed out, the other half are lying on top of one another. Luckily, he doesn’t see Regulus.

He can hear the fruits of their labour already. Under different circumstances he would be soaking up every minute of it—the profanities intermingled with the creaking noises of beds sneezing.

“Maybe we should give them Pepperup?” he hears one boy say from the doorway of his dorm room as James pushes up the stairs.

People are going in and out of each other's rooms, confused and trying to figure out if anyone has found the counter-charm. The sound of footsteps and door slamming and people being thrown off their beds echoes around James. Sirius would be so proud.

He slips into Regulus's dorm just as some other Slytherin he doesn't recognize walks out. After the chaos outside the room feels startlingly quiet. That is. Until he hears Rosier.

"Motherfucking bollocks, I was going to get laid tonight," he kicks the leg of his bed which is apparently enough to set off the charm because the mattress lifts up and sneezes. "Oh really? REALLY? Salazar's balls — how did they even get in here?"

James walks a little further into the room and sees that Rosier is talking to Regulus. Regulus is sitting on the floor, back pressed to the wall, arms resting on his knees. James's traitorous heart leaps.

"What makes you so sure it wasn't one of the younger years?" he asks, though he doesn't sound like he believes what he's saying.

"Are you kidding me? You think one of those brats could pull this off? That they would dare? No, this has Potter and your brother written all over it and I swear the next time I see them I'm going to permanently separate them from their bollocks."

Regulus doesn't really react to this, expression blank as he stares back at Rosier. The door bangs open and Crouch comes through, James grateful that he's moved far enough away to avoid a collision.

"Well?" Rosier demands, but Crouch shakes his head.

"Nah, seventh years haven't got a clue."

"What. The. Fuck," he kicks his bed again. There's another sneeze. Rosier points his wand at it. "Novis Sternius," nothing happens. "Come on you stupid piece of shit. Novis Sternius, Novis Sternius, Novis Sternius!"

"Evan," Regulus says from the floor, sounding exhausted. "Give it a rest."

Rosier rounds on him. "You know Reg, you're being incredibly unhelpful right now."

"Am I?" Regulus asks dryly, causing Rosier's eyes to narrow.

"You're supposed to be the clever one, what's the bloody counter-charm?"

Regulus sighs, dropping his head back against the wall and looking up at the ceiling when he talks. "It's a mutation of the spell."

"What?" Crouch asks, it's only then that James realizes that Crouch is swaying on the spot, eyes glassy, clearly the drunkest of the three.

"They've adapted the original spell, which means that there doesn't exist a known counter-charm, we'd have to figure one out, which we could do, after a few hours of reading up on

the etymology of the Sternius charm, though, of course, by that point the charm will likely have worn off by itself anyway and Evan still won't have been able to shag Louise."

There's a beat of silence before Rosier lets out a growl. "Fucking fuckity fuck—I'm going to kill them."

Crouch, on the other hand, seems significantly more accepting of the situation. Likely, James imagines, due to the alcohol. He's able to snag the blanket and pillow off his bed, though it does sneeze in the process. He throws them down on the floor and gets comfortable. Rosier, on the other hand, has started pacing, running his hands furiously through his hair.

"You know what? No. No. Fuck those assholes, I'm going to find Louise. How the bloody hell did they even get in here?!"

James isn't sure if he's really asking anymore, but apparently Regulus decides that he isn't because he doesn't say anything, watching passively as his friend storms out of the room, door slamming behind him.

Regulus sighs, leaning his head back against the wall again and closing his eyes. After a few seconds of silence James hears Crouch start to snore. He figures it's now or never, so he walks forward, sitting himself beside Regulus but keeping the cloak on. He has no idea when Rosier—or anyone else for that matter—is going to come storming back in here.

"Good party?" he asks quietly.

Regulus jolts upright, eyes flying open as he looks around.

"Certainly looked like you were having fun," James goes on, bringing Regulus's gaze towards him, though it lands somewhere off his left shoulder rather than his face.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Regulus hisses, eyes going to Crouch's sleeping body and then the door.

James doesn't see any point in beating around the bush. "You were kissing someone."

Regulus blinks, eyes coming back to James's shoulder. "What?"

"You were snogging some bird."

Regulus continues to stare at him, a plethora of expressions flicking across his face so quickly James loses track. Then, Regulus reaches forward, managing to grab hold of the front of James's shirt and yanking them both to their feet.

"What are you—"

"Shut up."

He drags James towards the bathroom, throwing him inside and then following after. Regulus shuts the door behind them, pulling out his wand, locking it and casting a silencing charm. Then he turns back to James.

“Take it off, I’m not talking to the fucking air.” His voice feels loud now, after the whispering. James does as he asks, pulling the cloak off and tossing it on the counter. Despite the anger in his eyes, it feels good to have Regulus finally looking at him, after a whole night of not being seen.

“What the hell are you doing here James?”

“I told you,” he grounds the words out. “Who was she?”

Regulus shakes his head. “I don’t know, some fourth year.”

James laughs. “Oh, some fourth year. Great. That’s great.”

“I don’t understand what you’re so upset about.”

James isn’t sure why that feels as shitty as it does. Why it makes something in his stomach lurch.

“You can’t understand why I’m upset?” he says slowly, and when Regulus continues to stare back at him with a blank expression he laughs, running a hand through his hair. “Last year I spoke to Lily at breakfast and you freaked out on me.”

Regulus’s gaze sharpens. “I didn’t freak out.”

“Bullshit.”

“I didn’t freak out,” Regulus repeats emphatically. “And that’s not even remotely the same.”

“Oh believe me, I know it’s not. For starters, I didn’t have my fucking mouth attached to her face.”

Regulus lets out an exasperated sigh. “You’re being childish.”

For a second James sees red. “I’m—sorry, I’m being what?” He has to grab hold of the counter to stop himself from punching something. Doing his best to breathe through the anger.

“James I—I’m not—“ Regulus makes a frustrated noise. “I hate this conversation,” he says more to himself than to James.

“The feeling is mutual.” James isn’t looking at him, can’t right now, without wanting to commit acts of violence. So instead he focuses on his knuckles.

“Look,” Regulus goes on, sounding slightly defeated. “I’m not interested in girls. At all. Ever. Alright?”

“You certainly looked interested.”

“Yes, well, that’s rather the point isn’t it?”

James finally turns to him. “What?”

Regulus rolls his eyes, which really does nothing for James’s anger. “Well if I was never seen kissing anyone people would start to get suspicious wouldn’t they?”

James tries to take that in. “So it’s a performance?”

“Obviously.”

“No, Reg, fuck you and your obviously right now. It wasn’t obvious to me.”

“Yes, I can see that,” and he does actually sound somewhat apologetic now. “In my defence, I didn’t know you were watching.”

“So that makes it okay?”

Regulus doesn’t look like he knows how to answer that.

James sighs, not wanting to ask his next question but finding the words in his mouth anyway. “This something you do often?”

Regulus gives him a flat look. “It’s something I do occasionally.”

“Since we’ve been together?”

“Like I said. Occasionally.”

He’s so good, James can’t help but think, at making it sound like things don’t matter.

“Fuck Reg,” he shakes his head, turning away again, facing the back wall. Trying to figure out what to do with whatever this feeling is—the one currently gnawing on his ribs.

A long moment of silence passes.

“I understand what you’re saying,” James says finally. “It’s a cover, to keep people from gossiping, I get it.”

“I’m sensing a but?” Regulus says, when it takes James too long to continue.

He doesn’t know how to say this.

How to make it make sense to Regulus. To himself.

“But it hurts,” which is the only way he can describe how it felt to watch Regulus with that girl. “Fuck it hurts. Real or fake.”

There’s another pause, and then James hears Regulus move, feels his arms slip around his waist, pulling him back into Regulus’s chest, and he lets him. Lets Regulus hook his chin over his shoulder and hold him close. He so rarely does. It’s always the other way ‘round.

They stay like that for a few seconds, pressed together, before Regulus sighs. “I’m sorry. I didn’t...consider...that it might affect you.”

“No, of course you didn’t.”

Regulus’s grip on him tightens. “I’m sorry.”

James melts further into him. He’s not used to being held this way. He likes it. Some nagging voice somewhere inside him tells him that he shouldn’t. Weak, it says. But James pushes it aside, because he’s too tired, and because Regulus’s warmth is untying some of the knots that have found their way into his stomach.

“I don’t want to hurt you James,” Regulus whispers, James can feel his breath on his neck. “I know I have. I know I will. I just—I need you to know—whatever happens, I never wanted to.”

James finds himself reminded of the words Regulus wrote at the bottom of his letter:

‘Everything is more beautiful because we’re doomed.’

James holds Regulus’s arms more tightly against himself. “Nothing’s going to happen Reg,” he says, with as much conviction as he can manage.

“James—“

“I don’t care, hurt me, I can take it.”

“James,” and this time his name comes out as a plea, and James turns his head to look at him, their eyes meeting over his shoulder, noses practically touching. He can see the sadness in Regulus’s eyes and he wants to wipe it away.

We’re not doomed, he wants to tell him. I won’t let us be.

And then they’re kissing, desperate and messy, like each of them has a point to prove. Eventually James turns around in Regulus’s arms, crowding him backwards until he’s sliding onto the counter, James between his thighs.

“This shirt,” James mutters against his mouth, running his hands up Regulus’s sides.

“You have a problem with my shirt?” Regulus asks breathlessly, James making his way under his jaw, behind his ear, to the sensitive patch of skin he knows Regulus likes, a shiver instantly running through the younger boy.

“It’s been driving me crazy.”

Regulus lets out a husky laugh. “I’ll have to wear it more often then.”

James groans into his skin. “God, don’t. I’ll die.”

And then he's back at Regulus's mouth, deepening the kiss, hands coming to either side of Regulus's face. He wants to kiss away every trace of that girl. He wants to be the only taste in his mouth.

The doorknob shakes and they break apart, both turning towards the noise. Then the pounding starts.

"Reg," Rosier shouts. "What the fuck? Did you lock the door? What the hell are you doing in there?"

Regulus sighs, leaning forward and resting his forehead against James's shoulder. "Guess Evan is back."

"Have I ever told you how much I hate your friends?"

Regulus snorts, pulling himself upright again. "C'mon, you should probably get out of here."

James makes a reluctant noise, leaning forward to kiss Reg one more time, not quite pulling back all the way.

"No more girls," it would be a demand, except his voice is too needy, too desperate. So instead it sounds like begging.

Eventually, Regulus nods. "No more girls."

"REGULUS!" Rosier continues to pound on the door. "I swear if you're dead in there I'm going to kill you...again."

Regulus rolls his eyes, sliding off the counter and looking in the mirror, straightening out his hair and shirt.

"You look good," James says, voice still a little rough.

Regulus sends him a sidelong look. "I look like someone was just snogging me senseless against the counter."

James beams. "Same thing."

Regulus is unable to hide his smile as he turns towards the door. "Ready?"

James slips the cloak over his head.

"I'll find some excuse to leave the room, open the door for you," Regulus goes on, pulling out his wand so he can take down the spells.

"Wow, what a gentleman."

Regulus snorts. "Speaking of gentlemen, any chance I could get the counter-charm for the beds?"

James smiles even though Regulus can't see him. "Don't have one."

Regulus sighs. "Of course you don't." And then; "Alohomora."

Fifteen minutes later, James walks into the Gryffindor common room, invisibility cloak in hand, and stops dead in his tracks at the sight of Sirius on the sofa. Waiting.

Fuck.

"Look, can we do this later?" he asks, but Sirius, of course, ignores him.

"I've been sitting here trying to come up with a single Slytherin bloke who isn't a complete piece of shit, and I have to tell you James, I'm drawing a blank."

James sighs, leaning against one of the chairs. "I never said he was in Slytherin."

"Please, lets not."

"Sirius—"

"Who is it James?"

James is entirely too tired for this conversation. "I told you, I can't say."

"Remus knows."

"Remus figured it out."

"So what?" Sirius growls. "What's the difference?"

"The difference," James can feel his frustration mounting, "is I didn't have to break a promise."

Sirius bounces his right knee up and down, body vibrating with anger. "Your promise to some Death Eater wannabe?"

James's fists clench. "Don't start Sirius."

Sirius laughs coldly, hanging his head. "You know, I expect most people to be full of shit. Everyone is principled until they have to sacrifice something. Until they have to put in the effort. Then all those morals seem to disappear, but you," Sirius looks up again. "I believed in you."

Those words hit him so hard James actually staggers back.

"And to think," Sirius goes on, not done yet, smiling in a way that sends chills down James's spine. "You were so fucking righteous last year when I messed up."

"That's a bullshit comparison and you know it," James snaps back.

“Is it?” Sirius gets to his feet. “How many people do you reckon your boy’s gonna hurt huh? How many has he already?”

“He’s not a Death Eater.”

Sirius laughs unpleasantly. “Sure, maybe he doesn’t have the uniform yet, but he is isn’t he? In here,” he taps his temple.

“I’m gonna get him out Sirius,” James sounds desperate now, words begging to be heard. “I’m going to show him it doesn’t have to be like that.”

For the first time since he walked into the common room James sees something other than anger in Sirius’s eyes. “You really believe that?”

“Yes.”

He does.

Deep in his bones.

Right down to his core.

“You can’t save people James,” Sirius says finally. “You can show them the way out but they have to walk through those doors themselves. Don’t you think I’ve tried?”

No.

Not like me.

You never loved him like I do.

And James knows that it’s such an unfair thing to think. But he does anyway. Clings to it.

He’ll follow me.

He trusts me.

I’ll show him that all love doesn’t have teeth.

That all families don’t make you bleed.

Sirius sighs when James can’t give him an answer, bringing his hands up to his face, scrubbing at his eyes.

“I know that you can’t see it,” he says finally. “But this? What you’re doing? It’s the wrong thing.”

“You can’t know that.”

“Sure I can,” Sirius looks like he has more to say but for once in his life holds his tongue, giving James a once over before shaking his head and turning towards the stairs.

“He’s different,” James says suddenly, desperate for Sirius to understand. “It’s not really him, the person everyone else sees, there’s so much good in him Sirius, I swear.”

Sirius stops on the first step, taking his time turning around. When he does all James sees is pity, it makes him flinch.

“And how long is that going to be enough, huh James? Until he gets the mark? Until he kills someone? Or do you reckon you’ll be able to make yourself believe that that’s okay too? That that’s not who he really is?”

“Sirius—“

“Thing is, it’s not a hypothetical for me,” something in his voice takes James off guard, something...bruised. “I’ve sat at their table, I’ve felt their teeth in my neck. There’s no fucking grey area here, okay? The things you have to do, to get by, to blend in—do you think if it had been easy I wouldn’t have done it? I—“ his voice cuts out and James finds himself unconsciously taking a step forward, reaching out to his best mate.

Sirius shakes himself, like pulling himself out of a nightmare, his dark eyes finding James. “They’re my family,” there is something heart wrenchingly vulnerable about those words. “I loved them. The awful truth, is that sometimes I still do. And if I could have made myself fit without crossing any lines I would have. But it’s not possible. You can’t be one of them and keep your hands clean. So if he’s friends with them? If he’s accepted by them? By that world? You can bet he’s doing some fucked up shit when you’re not looking.”

James shakes his head but doesn’t speak. Can’t. Doesn’t even know where to start. He expects Sirius to turn around and leave but he doesn’t, and after a few more moments of silence he walks back down the stairs, stopping in front of James.

“I love him,” James says pathetically, because he has nothing else. Because it’s the one thing that he knows without a doubt to be true. “It’s so—so strong and so—so much. And I—I hope you’re wrong, I need you to be wrong. Because I can’t—” his voice cracks, unwilling to finish that sentence.

Sirius’s expression softens. “Jesus James,” he pulls him into a hug and James goes willingly, sagging against his best friend. “You really have terrible taste in men.”

James laughs wetly. “I don’t know, I did alright with you lot.”

Sirius snorts, but when he speaks his voice is sad, and James doesn’t know whose heart hurts more—his or Sirius’s.

“Yeah,” Sirius croaks, “you did alright with us.”

Hey! Hi! Hello!

I feel like this chapter has the most teenager-y angst which was fun.

Also Remus Lupin is 100% that friend that throws your phone out the window when you start trying to drunk text your ex (this is a James Potter call out)

I hope you liked it, as always, super appreciate all the comments and love to know what you think!

Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

Moony

Chapter Notes

OKAY, listen, I may have taken some creative liberties in this chapter and given the Shrieking Shack a front door (partially because in my head the Shrieking Shack is a pre-existing abandoned house that Dumbledore uses for Remus not one he builds for him, because that makes more sense to me even though I know it's not canon - but I digress) hopefully that doesn't bother people too much!

also...

tw: Death / implied suicide (happens off screen not graphically described)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Marlene thinks you’re cute.”

Remus blinks down at his coursework and then up at Mary Macdonald, who has just dropped into the seat across from him at the library. The library he’d come to specifically to get away from people, choosing a table at the back, hidden by bookshelves and almost always empty.

“Hey, hello,” Mary sticks her hand in his face and snaps her fingers, “Earth to Remus, did you hear me?”

Remus sighs. “I heard you. I was just hoping you’d go away.”

Mary sticks her tongue out at him. “Tough luck buttercup. So?”

“So?”

Mary waves her hand impatiently “So, what do you think about Marlene calling you cute?”

“Er...that’s...nice of her?” Though honestly, Remus isn’t sure “cute” is exactly the look he’s going for. Cute is for puppies. Or babies. Not...whatever he is. Boy-man-person-werewolf.

“Nice of her?” Mary demands, clearly offended on Marlene’s behalf.

Remus brings his hands up to his head, massaging his temples. “What exactly do you want from me Mary?”

She leans forward, dark braids slipping over her shoulder. “I want to know what you’re going to do about it.”

Remus blinks. “Do about it?”

“If I were you, I’d ask her to Hogsmeade this weekend.”

It takes Remus’s brain a moment to catch up—to understand the connection between being called “cute” and asking someone to go to Hogsmeade with you.

“Like...on a date?” he says slowly, hating everything about that idea.

The eye roll Mary gives him is truly spectacular. “Yes, Merlin, I thought you were the clever one.”

“Common misconception,” Remus says off handedly, which is true. People think James and Sirius are idiots because they act like it, but that’s a choice on their part. Even Peter is smarter than most people give him credit for, he just isn’t good at school. He can learn anything if you explain it to him out loud, even if it’s only once. And he picks up spells just by watching. It’s books he struggles with.

“So we’re agreed then?” Mary says triumphantly. “You should take her to the Three Broomsticks.”

“Bit obvious that, where else do you take someone in Hogsmeade?” He has no idea why he’s playing along with this, there’s no way he’s taking Marlene anywhere.

“Well you were a little slow on the uptake so I’m not sure what’s obvious to you, and I don’t want you to do something stupid like bring her to Madam Puddifoot’s.”

Remus makes a face even just thinking about that place—pink and frilly and blasting sickly sweet smells into the street that give him a migraine every time he walks by.

“Yes, exactly,” Mary says gravely. “Good to know you have some taste. That bodes well for this.”

“Bodes well for—listen, Mary...” he doesn’t know how to finish that sentence though. He considers telling her the truth, but what would that even look like?

Hey Mary, I’m not going to go out with Marlene. I don’t fancy her. I’m in love with my psychotic best friend, or ex-best friend, depending on how you look at it, who’s too afraid to admit that he wants to kiss me let alone anything else. My love life is really complicated enough as it is. Also, I’m a werewolf.

Would that be too much?

“Remus? Merlin, what is with you today?”

Remus blinks, coming back to the present as Mary impatiently taps her nails on the table between them.

“Sorry. Look, I like Marlene a lot—“

“Great!”

Remus does his best not to cringe. “Yeah, great, but I’m not—“ his next words drop out of his mouth as Regulus Black walks into view, which in and of itself would have been annoying enough, but is even more annoying because Regulus is with someone. A girl someone.

“That little prick.”

“Wow what?”

Remus turns back to Mary, realizing what he’s just done. “Oh—no, sorry, I didn’t, I wasn’t, it was—“

“Really not into finishing your sentences today are you?” Mary asks, looking, to Remus’s relief, much more amused than angry. “I suppose it does give you a bit of a mysterious vibe, Marlene might be into that.”

Remus can’t tell if she’s joking or not. “Er—“

“Remus!” Someone shouts, far too loudly for the library.

To his horror, Remus realizes that the girl Regulus is with—who he can now see is Cerci Greengrass—is coming towards them.

Mary tilts her head. “Wow, she’s adorable.”

Remus doesn’t find that statement to be particularly helpful, especially considering that Cerci’s currently in the stacks with the boy who’s meant to be seeing his best mate. And the only reason people come to the stacks is to snog. Well, people who aren’t Remus anyway.

“Friend of yours?” Mary asks.

“No.” He doesn’t even know why he says it, he likes Cerci well enough, she’s very… energetic.

“Well, maybe you should tell her that cause she’s coming over here with—bloody hell, is that Regulus Black? Weird couple.”

“They’re not a couple,” Remus says harshly. Even though he’s not entirely sure that’s true.

“Hi Remus,” Cerci beams as she stops in front of their table, a very reluctant Regulus trailing behind her. He looks as happy about this situation as Remus is.

“Hey Cerci,” he says, because he doesn’t know what else to do. Mary clears her throat, drawing Remus’s attention back to her. “Oh—uh—this is my friend, Mary.”

"I know who she is," Cerci smiles. "Mary Macdonald, Gryffindor Chaser, scoring average of eighty-points per game and owner of exceptionally fashionable shoes."

"Ooh, I like you," Mary then turns unnecessarily to Remus and fake whispers: "I like her."

"I heard," he says flatly, busy glaring at Regulus whose expression is infuriatingly blank.

"We were just going to study," Cerci, explains. "Reg is helping me with potions, I'm absolutely useless at it."

"Ah, I have fond memories studying back here," Mary says wistfully, and Remus is pretty sure he can hear the air quotes around "studying" in her voice. "Actually, I did a lot of that with your brother," she sends Regulus a meaningful look but the younger boy's expression doesn't shift, he just stares back blankly.

"You guys study together a lot?" Remus asks coldly.

Regulus meets Remus's eye. "No."

"I don't know, we get together at least twice a week, that's pretty often. Who do you study with more than twice a week?" Cerci looks back at Regulus sounding genuinely curious.

"Yes, do tell Regulus," Mary leans forward across the table, hungry for gossip. "Who are you studying with more than twice a week?"

Remus grits his teeth and resists the urge to hex someone.

"No one," the other boy says eventually, sounding incredibly exhausted by the entire conversation.

"Ah, a one girl kind of guy huh?" Mary says with a wink and Remus can't help but scoff.

He's going to kill this kid. He never deserved James in the first place, but this? It's way over the line. All he can think about is the look on James's face at that party.

"I mean, we're partners so, makes sense that we hang out together more," Cerci smiles, elbowing Regulus playfully.

"I'm sorry, you're what?" Remus demands.

Regulus, being the absolute wanker that he is, has the audacity to roll his eyes. "She means we're Prefect partners."

"Prefect partners?" Mary repeats, before turning to Remus. "Is that a thing?"

"No," Remus doesn't stop glaring at Regulus. "That is definitely not a thing."

"I kind of made it a thing," Cerci smiles.

"Wow, okay, this is almost too adorable," Mary says.

Remus violently disagrees. He feels his hands shaking with the desire to strangle Regulus.

“I have to go,” he says instead, standing abruptly and spelling his stuff into his bag.

“Oh, sorry, did we interrupt or...?”

“Honestly, you’ve made this trip to the library far more entertaining for me so I don’t know what his problem is,” Mary says nonchalantly, as Remus throws his book bag over his shoulder and turns to Regulus.

“You’re unbelievable.”

The younger boy doesn’t even flinch. “You’re willfully misunderstanding.”

Remus shakes his head, turning around, fully intending to walk out of the library and leave it at that. Unfortunately, he’s spent far too much time with Sirius Black to be the bigger person.

“Locomotor Wibbly,” he tosses over his shoulder, getting the satisfaction of watching Regulus’s unflappable expression crack open in surprise as his legs give out underneath him.

“Remus, holy shit,” he hears Mary say as he walks away.

“Wow,” Cerci adds, voice following Remus into the hallway. “I’ve never seen a Jelly-legs jinx in real life before, that was brilliant.”

He probably shouldn’t have done that.

He’s a Prefect, as McGonagall reminds him several times after calling him into her office, taking two dozen house points from Gryffindor and giving him detention—unfortunately not on the weekend so he’s still going to have to figure out what to do about the Mary/Marlene situation. Maybe fake an illness? He’s “sick” often enough, he can’t imagine anyone would question it.

By the time McGonagall is done dressing him down he has a headache and he’s tired and grumpy and just wants to sit quietly in a dark room and nap until supper. Which, really, he ought to have known was never going to happen, but he briefly forgot who his friends are.

“Remus John Lupin,” he’s barely in the door before Sirius is throwing himself at his feet—literally—bowing to him like he’s some kind of god. “You are my hero.”

Remus rolls his eyes, walking very purposefully around Sirius towards his bed. “You’ve talked to Mary then,” he says flatly, making brief eye contact with James who’s sitting at the end of his own bed, an expression on his face that Remus can’t read.

“Pretty sure half the school has talked to Mary at this point,” Peter adds unhelpfully.

Remus sighs, dropping his bag and collapsing onto his bed. “Brilliant.”

“I mean, Jelly-legs jinx? In the middle of the Library? Merlin, the balls, I can’t,” Sirius goes on.

Remus very staunchly refuses to care that Sirius is impressed. Even if the little second year inside of him is loving the idea that Sirius Black thinks he did something ballsy.

“Tell me,” Sirius says, as he collapses onto the bed next to him, propped up on his elbows so that he’s hovering over Remus. Sirius has never had any concept of personal space. “What did he do? Did he squeal? Like a little girl?”

These days, Sirius has taken to trying to pretend that the tension between them doesn’t exist. Remus can’t tell if it makes him feel angry or sad. Or guilty. Because he knows that Sirius is trying, trying to make things better, and Remus isn’t letting him. Can’t let him.

“Shockingly,” he says finally, voice dry. “I didn’t do it for your amusement.”

“Why did you do it?” Peter asks. “I mean, he must have really pissed you off to make you hex him?”

Remus looks briefly at James again and then away. “He was being a prick.”

“Ah, well, that’s kind of Regulus’s default setting isn’t it?” Sirius says casually. Not that Remus actually believes that anything Sirius feels about his brother is casual.

There’s a pause before Remus sighs, swiping a hand across his face. “Is he okay?”

“Pfft,” Sirius scoffs, “he’s fine, ego probably knocked down a few pegs though.”

Remus makes the mistake of looking at Sirius then, Sirius who is much too close to him, with his bright eyes and pretty mouth. Sometimes Remus doesn’t know how he’s managed this for so long—Sirius always being so close, always touching him and whispering into his ear, lying on his bed. Ever since last year, ever since the kiss, being around Sirius feels like some strange form of torture. It makes Remus burn from the inside out.

He pulls himself up, reaching for his bag. At least coursework will give him something else to focus on.

“What’d McGonagall give you?”

Remus looks up from his books. It’s the first time James has said anything since Remus walked into the room. He doesn’t find anger in James’s eyes, but then, he wasn’t expecting to. Just disappointment. He wonders if Mary mentioned Cerci Greengrass in her re-telling of the story?

“Moony?” he blinks as Sirius waves his hand in his face, startling him out of his thoughts.

“Sorry,” Remus shakes his head, “been doing that a lot today. Um—detention and I lost twenty points.”

“Twenty!” Peter says outraged.

“Worth it,” Sirius counters from Remus’s other side. “Hey Moony, does this mean you’re missing Hogsmeade this weekend?”

He shakes his head, pulling out his Charms textbook, “Nope.”

“Great, I was worried I was going to be all on my own.”

That makes Remus look up. “What do you mean?”

Sirius rolls his eyes, letting out an exaggerated sigh. “Well, Wormtail has gone and gotten himself a date with some Hufflepuff—“

“Rebecca! I’ve told you her name like ten times.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Sirius waves his hand dismissively. “I can’t be expected to remember the name of every fair damsel.”

“It’s literally one name.”

“ANYWAY,” Sirius goes on. “Peter is abandoning us for Rachel,” Peter groans, “ and Jamie here is also going to be...occupied...apparently.”

James rolls his eyes. “Look, I already told you, I’m sorry. It’s only this one time, okay?”

“So you see Moons, it’ll be just you and I,” he smiles at Remus then, a little nervously, and Remus feels his pulse speed up.

Him and Sirius. Hanging out all day. Alone. In Hogsmeade. There was a time when that would have sounded like a dream come true to him, when he wanted nothing more than to have Sirius’s undivided attention. Now he can’t think of anything worse. It’s...too much. Too much like something he can’t have.

“Uh, actually I’m going with Marlene,” the words come out of his mouth before he can stop them.

There’s a beat of silence.

“You...you’re going with Marlene?” James asks.

“Like on a date?” Peter adds.

And despite the fact that this whole thing is completely ridiculous and just Mary sticking her nose where it doesn’t belong because she’s—Remus doesn’t know, bored?—he actually finds himself a little annoyed at their surprise.

“I can go on dates,” he snaps back, flipping aimlessly through his textbook, just to have something to do with his hands. He can see Sirius out of the corner of his eye, sitting stock still, his face drained of all expression—it reminds him eerily of Regulus.

“Yeah, ‘course you can mate,” James says, though Remus can see him looking at Sirius too, concern creasing his brow. Which is completely unfair because if this is anybody’s fault it’s Sirius’s. With his “I don’t know” and “I can’t handle this” what, is Remus just supposed to sit around and never fancy anyone again?

Suddenly, Sirius pulls himself off of Remus’s bed, not looking at him. “I’m going to take a shower,” he says gruffly.

“Padfoot?” but he ignores James, slamming the bathroom door behind him.

“Woah,” Peter says, “what was that about?”

Remus shakes his head, looking back down at the book in his hands and feeling his anger and sadness and guilt all twisting around one another. “No idea.”

He isn’t able to track Marlene down until later the next day, when they’re coming back from transfiguration and he spots her alone in the common room.

“Hey, I’ll catch up with guys later, okay?” he says as he starts pulling away.

James pauses, looking like he’s about to ask why when his eyes find Marlene. “Uh—sure, yeah, okay Moons.”

Sirius doesn’t look at him. Doesn’t speak. Hasn’t all day.

Good, Remus thinks bitterly, stalking his way across the common room. Now you know how it feels.

“Hey Mar, can I talk to you for a sec?” he asks, standing awkwardly in front of her as his friends disappear up the stairs.

She looks up from the book in her lap and smiles. “Merlin please, anything so I can stop reading about allergy potions.”

Remus smiles weakly as he sits down next to her, palms already sweaty. He’s not exactly sure the best way to approach this—he doesn’t want to lead Marlene on, but he also doesn’t want to give Sirius the satisfaction of knowing he lied.

“Okay, so, I was wondering if...you’d wanna go to Hogsmeade with me...as a friend?”

She arches her brow, and Remus can tell she’s holding back a smirk. “You’re asking me out...as a friend?”

He grimaces. “Yeah. And also maybe don’t mention the friend bit to anyone else. Like Mary. Or Sirius.”

Marlene makes an “oh” shape with her mouth and Remus is glad that she seems to have understood something, because he is not at all confident that anything he just said made

sense.

“Mary put you up to this?” she asks.

“Er—a bit, but then also...”

“Also?”

He exhales, “I—“ his voice cuts out, eyes going to the stairs. “James and Peter are busy and I just can’t—I can’t be alone with Sirius. It—we’re—“ he shakes his head, mouth helplessly opening and closing, begging Marlene to understand.

“Merlin, Remus, I will happily go on a fake date with you if it’ll get you to stop looking at me with your sad lost puppy dog eyes. Besides, it’ll help me with Mary anyway.”

He sags back against the sofa. “Oh thank God,” and then, after he’s caught his breath. “Why is she so interested in finding you a date anyway?”

Marlene rolls her eyes. “I don’t know, she thinks I’m stunted or lonely or something.”

“Oh,” and then; “Are you?”

“Jeez,” she snorts. “Rude much?”

“Sorry,” Remus says quickly. “I didn’t mean it to be, I’m a bit stunted and lonely myself to be honest with you.”

Marlene’s smile takes on a slightly new aspect, softer than it was before. There’s a brief pause before she speaks. “Well alright then, if we’re being honest, I’m a bit lonely and a bit stunted, but not in the ways she thinks. At least not exactly.”

Remus stares at her for a minute before shaking his head. “I don’t follow?”

Marlene doesn’t look surprised by this.

“Sometimes,” she tries again, “the people we’re closest to, are the hardest people to be honest with. Because it feels like pulling the rug out from under them, if we turn out to be something other than what they thought. Does that make sense?”

Remus takes his time, trying to figure out the look in Marlene’s eyes. He knows that she’s saying more than the words coming out of her mouth. He’s just not entirely sure if it’s what he thinks it is.

“Yes,” he says finally. “You’re lonely and stunted because you’re pretending to be the person you think she thinks you are?”

“Bit of a tongue twister huh?”

Remus smiles dryly, running a hand through his hair before eventually speaking again; “What if she actually knows you better than you think?”

“Ah, well,” she walks her fingers along the spine of her book. “That’s the problem isn’t it? We all secretly hope that the people we love really know us. So I guess I’m protecting myself as much as her. Because I’m not sure that I’m brave enough to find out that she doesn’t.”

Remus remembers how it had felt, the first time he realized that James knew he fancied Sirius. Remembers the fear, that he would lose him, that this person he had allowed himself to get so attached to would never look at him the same. Would suddenly see him as a stranger.

“I think she’ll surprise you,” he says finally. “Mary.”

Marlene looks up from her book, smiling sadly. “I hope so.”

It’s chilly out these days, the trees all changing colours, the summer completely evaporated. Remus listens to Marlene talk about Quidditch on their way down to Hogsmeade, he’s picked up enough from James and Sirius over the years that he can contribute here and there. Besides, it’s fun to hear about James’s captaincy from someone other than James himself.

“He’s really good with the younger kids,” she says as they get a table at The Three Broomsticks. “I mean, I know James, I know he’s not as much of a tosser as he seems—“

“That’s debatable.”

She smirks at Remus before continuing. “The way he is on the pitch though, you’d think he’d have no patience for teaching but,” she shakes her head, taking a sip of her butterbeer. “He’s brilliant at it.”

Remus smiles, hands closing around his own drink. “Fun fact: James Potter is an excellent teacher, I would’ve failed potions if it hadn’t for him.”

Marlene laughs. “Really?”

He nods. “Yeah, but don’t tell Lily, she thinks it was her.”

Marlene mimes sealing her lips. “Your secret is safe with me.”

“Thank you,” Remus dips his head in a mocking bow. “It’s all those boiling points and cutting techniques and measurements,” Remus shivers at the thought. “I’ve always been shit at it, but James, well...his father invented Sleekeazy’s Hair Potion, did you know that?”

“What? No way! My brother practically lives off that stuff. I thought his dad worked for the ministry?”

“He does now,” Remus sips his drink. “I think he started once things got a little...dicy, politically. Came out of retirement.”

Marlene lets out a low whistle. “Good man, not sure you’d get me out of retirement to sort out this mess.”

Remus laughs, shaking his head. "Yeah, no, me neither. But...it's a very Potter thing to do. They're all like that. Their capacity for empathy is a bit boundless. Makes me worry about James honestly."

He tries and fails not to think about Regulus, about how that's who James is with right now. He knows Sirius read him the riot act when he found out James was seeing someone in Slytherin but it doesn't seem to have made a difference. Remus suspects that if Sirius knew which Slytherin his best mate was currently with he wouldn't have let it go so easily. The problem is, this thing between James and Regulus, it's going to get someone hurt. And Remus has a hunch that that someone isn't going to be Regulus.

"Hey," Marlene nudges him lightly with her foot, "where'd you go?"

Remus blinks. "Sorry, just...thinking."

She squints at him, as if trying to work him out. "About James?"

He nods noncommittally, bringing his butterbeer to his mouth.

"Funny," she says. "I always thought it was Sirius you daydreamed about."

The butterbeer proceeds to come straight back out, spraying across the table. "What?" he yelps.

He can tell Marlene is holding in a laugh as she pulls out her wand and spells away the mess. "Guess I was right after all," she looks at him smugly and Remus honestly has no idea what to say to that. "It's the eyes," she goes on. "You two are always making eyes at one another. Big ones. With hearts in the centre. It's adorable really. Mary thinks that's why you're fighting by the way."

She says it all so casually that Remus is having a hard time keeping up. "I—first of all, no we don't. And second of all, why would Mary want me to date you if she thought..."

Marlene rolls her eyes. "Right, well, she hasn't got it quite right. She thinks Sirius made a move on you so you kicked him out of the dorm."

"WHAT."

"Mmhm," she nods.

He doesn't even know where to start with that. "That's not why we're fighting," is what he decides on.

She gives him a look. "Yeah, I figured it wasn't."

"Why would she even think that Sirius would..."

"That," Marlene tilts her glass towards him. "I'm not allowed to disclose."

Remus can feel his breath coming too short and too fast. He doesn't like this, people speculating about his life, people getting so close. Knowing things he never told them. It makes him feel trapped.

"But you didn't tell her?" he manages finally. "About the...the heart eyes?"

Marlene smiles. "No. I didn't tell her. None of my business."

Remus nods his head, trying and failing to make himself feel better about this. After a few minutes Marlene reaches across the table, squeezing his hand. "Remus, you don't have to be afraid of me okay?" And when he continues to stare at her wide eyed and speechless she nods her head over her shoulder. "If it makes you feel better, my secret's standing right over there."

It takes Remus a minute to hear what she's said over the buzzing panic in his ears, but eventually he follows her gaze to the bar where Dorcas Meadows is chatting with Rosmerta. Remus blinks a few times.

"Dorcas?"

Marlee nods, taking another sip of her drink.

"That's what you're pretending not to be for Mary?"

She nods again.

He sags back in his chair, running a hand over his still burning hot face. "God," he says, and then, before he can stop himself; "we must be the gayest year in Hogwarts history."

Marlene's face lights up and she laughs with her whole body. After a second Remus is laughing with her, both in relief and at the ridiculousness of all of it. All of them running around terrified of one another, of themselves. How exhausting. How unnecessary. He can't help but notice Dorcas looking over at them.

"Does she know?" he asks quietly, once the pair of them have regained their sanity.

Marlene lets out a heavy sigh. "Sometimes I think she does, there are these moments where I swear it sits in the room with us, you know?"

And oh boy, does Remus ever. "Yeah, I know."

"But we've never said anything. Done anything," she shrugs, looking down at the table.

Remus watches her for a minute before nudging her with his foot. "You should go talk to her."

For the first time he sees panic in Marlene's eyes. "God, I don't know. Scarier than falling off a broom that."

"Please, I've seen you do it loads of times."

“Yeah,” she laughs, “and it was terrifying all those times.”

“Okay fine, but worth it. Wasn’t it?”

She bites her smile, sneaking a look over her shoulder. Dorcas quickly turns her attention back to Rosmerta, “Yeah, it was worth it.”

“So? No point sitting here on a fake date with me when you’ve got something real right there.”

Marlene’s mouth pulls to the side, unconvinced as she turns her drink nervously in her hands.

“Listen,” he leans forward, “if it helps, she hasn’t stopped looking at you the whole time I’ve been watching.”

Marlene laughs, her cheeks flushing a deep red. “Remus Lupin, matchmaker.”

“Oh God, no one wants that.”

She smiles at him, taking in a deep breath. “Okay, okay, I’m going to do it.”

“You’re going to do it.”

“Alright,” she wipes her palms off on her jeans as she gets to her feet. “Wish me luck?”

Remus raises his glass. “Good luck.”

He watches her walk across the bar, watches Dorcas’s face light up when she realizes Marlene is coming to talk to her, and he wonders why it always seems so much simpler when it’s other people? Why can he feel so confident about where Marlene and Dorcas stand after only a few minutes, but he never knows where he stands with the people in his own life? Hell, some days he isn’t even sure if Sirius likes him.

Marlene and Dorcas start heading towards the door and just before they disappear outside she looks back at him, giving him a megawatt smile and a thumbs up. He laughs a little, returning the gesture. He hopes it works out. Hopes he was right about Mary.

He passes his glass back and forth between his hands and tries to figure out what to do now. He supposes he could just go back to the dorm, it should be empty for once, maybe he’ll actually be able to get some work done. Unless Peter decides to bring Rebecca up there—which, knowing him, he might. Remus grimaces into his butterbeer. Well, there’s always the library...

“Where’s your date?”

His head snaps up and he almost laughs as his eyes meet charcoal grey. Sirius hovers at the end of his table, hands in his pockets, looking about as close to nervous as Remus has ever seen him. At least in a nonemergency situation.

“Uh, she left actually.”

Sirius arches his brow. “That bad?”

“Yeah—or—no, it was good, it was really nice but...”

“But?”

Remus shrugs. “Just don’t think we’re meant to be more than mates.”

“Ah,” Sirius says, though he doesn’t quite manage to keep the smile out of his voice. “In that case, may I?” he gestures to Marlene’s empty seat, and Remus is faced with the realization that this is exactly the situation he was trying to avoid. Apparently fate has other plans.

“Sure,” he nods, taking another gulp of his butterbeer just to have something to do. “So, what’re you doing here?”

Sirius gives him a rueful smile. “Oh, you know, I was...thirsty.”

“Thirsty?”

“Mhm,” he starts tearing up one of the napkins. “Also I wanted to spy on your date. You know, make sure you were getting on okay.”

“Uh-huh, you check on Peter too?” Remus asks flatly.

“Pfft,” Sirius scoffs, “obviously.”

“You need a hobby Pads.”

“Listen, I gotta check up on my boys alright? And good thing I did too, saved you from sitting here all alone and pathetic.”

“Now instead I get to sit here and be insulted.”

“Exactly!” he grins at Remus who feels his chest grow tight. He tries to shake it off but he can’t get anything past Sirius. “Moons?”

“Sorry, I just...” he lets out a deep breath, staring down at the table for a minute.

“Do you want me to go?”

He laughs humourlessly. “No.”

“Okay...do you want me to stay?”

“No.”

“I see.”

“Yeah.”

Because really, that's it, in a nutshell, how he feels about Sirius. He wants to never see him again, except that he also wants to see him every second of every day. It is endlessly frustrating.

Eventually Remus manages to force himself to speak. "Will you do something with me?" he makes himself hold Sirius's stare, even if it cracks some of his ribs to do it.

"Of course," Sirius says without hesitating.

He nods. "Good—or, thanks, I guess," there's an awkward pause. "Well, lets—er—go then."

He slides out of the booth and starts towards the door, Sirius jogging to catch up with him.

"Wow, you're really on a mission huh?" he says as they push into the crisp fall air.

"Just worried I'll lose my nerve if I stop to think about it."

Sirius pauses for a minute, and then; "You won't."

Remus lets out a short laugh. "You don't even know where we're going."

"Don't need to," Sirius shrugs. "I know your nerves."

Remus looks over at him, meeting Sirius's eyes. God, he feels that look right down to his toes. He quickly goes back to staring straight ahead.

They don't talk, which is unusual for Sirius but Remus gets the feeling that he's trying to follow Remus's lead and Remus is currently just trying not to be sick. He wants to get over it what happened last year, and this is the closest he's come to figuring out how.

It takes Sirius longer than he would have thought to realize where they're going. It speaks to the type of person he is that his steps only falter for a second.

"Are we—"

"Yeah," Remus says, the main street fading into the background behind them and the lone figure of the shrieking shack coming more fully into view. So named for the terrible screaming that comes from inside. He's often heard the first and second years trying to guess what kind of monster makes them. On the days when he's feeling especially bitter he thinks about telling them.

They climb through the fence, making their way silently up the front steps, unlocking the door with a simple "Alohomora." Immediately Remus feels a chill run down his spine, legs locking-up on the threshold, his whole body revolting against the idea of being here.

"Remus?" Sirius asks tentatively.

"I'm fine," he says, before taking a deep breath and pressing forward, he hears Sirius close the door behind them.

This building is only slightly less eerie in the daytime. The windows all boarded-up, light coming through the cracks in crisscrossing lines that cut scars in the dark. It smells heavily of rot and sweat and earth. Like the whole place is slowly decaying.

He stops in the bedroom—his bedroom, really—stops in front of the dirty, stained mattress he dies on once a month. He can hear memories like ghosts. Can hear the sound of his bones cracking, voice breaking, thoughts falling apart. Sirius stays by the door, Remus with his back to him.

“I told James not to come that night,” he says, slowly opening the door on memories he’s spent months trying to rip out of his head.

“Why?” Sirius asks, when Remus doesn’t continue.

“Because you weren’t back yet, because you’d just lost your uncle and I thought it was too much to ask you to do...this...after that. Because it seemed unfair to leave you alone.”

There’s a beat of silence.

“James tell you to fuck off?”

Remus actually manages to laugh despite the constricting weight that’s been building in his chest since they walked through the door. “Yeah, pretty much. Still, when you were all late I thought, I don’t know, maybe he’d changed his mind. Maybe you came back in worse shape than he’d thought.”

He can already feel the fear swelling inside him, the anxiety of that night crawling along his skin.

“But it’s worse alone, the full moon,” he finally manages to go on. “So when I heard the door open downstairs I was...relieved. Selfishly,” he laughs again but this time it gets all strangled in his throat. This is where the story starts to hurt.

“Remus—”

“No, please I—I need to do this. I need you to hear this. To feel it. Because you weren’t here. Because you don’t have all these...memories, and I hate you for it. I can’t forgive you, for not being here. So I need you to be here now. I need you to hear it. I need you to help me fucking carry this, okay?”

There’s a moment of silence.

“Yeah,” Sirius croaks. “Yeah Moony, okay.”

He nods, his nails digging into the palms of his hands. “You’ll hate this, but I thought he was you at first. It was dark and his hair—so for a second, when he was walking down that hallway, I thought he was you. I thought, Sirius came. He came for me,” he has to stop again, stop himself from losing control. It seems stupid now, but at the time he had felt so happy seeing Sirius walk towards him. It made everything that came afterwards hurt so much more.

After a few minutes he goes on. "When I saw that it was Snape I thought I was in a fucking nightmare. Kept waiting for myself to wake up. He was asking me questions but I couldn't really hear him, I was in so much pain at that point that everything was just fuzzy. I kept begging him to leave. He had his wand and I didn't and he kept stepping closer to me so I had to back up all the way against the wall. I've never felt so trapped before. Never felt so fucking scared."

He's shaking now, a cold sweat breaking out over his skin as flashes of that night rush through his head. "And then James was there and that was better and worse all at the same time. Because then there was the chance that I could hurt him too," he closes his eyes briefly. "They're different, my memories when I'm a wolf, but I do remember. I pushed them down the stairs. James and Snape. And there was blood, there was so much blood. I loved it," his voice breaks. "I wanted more of it. Of the smell. The taste. I wanted more. And James was so scared, I could feel him. And I loved that too."

It's getting harder to keep his breathing even, small black spots flickering across his vision. "I'd never felt that before. Even as a wolf. Never felt the need to bite so badly. And I fucking hate that I know now, that it's in me, that I'm capable of it. Hate that those feelings ever existed inside me. That they still exist inside me."

He forces his fists to relax, forces himself to turn around. Sirius is still in the doorway, watching Remus, pale faced and wide-eyed.

"I licked their blood off the floor," his voice shakes, bile crawling up the back of his throat. Hunger stirring in his stomach. "Greyback might have made me a werewolf, but you, Sirius? You made me a monster."

Sirius doesn't flinch, doesn't drop his gaze. "No Remus," he says, voice as earnest as Remus has ever heard it. "You're not the monster in this story, okay? None of that was your fault. It was mine. It's me."

Remus doesn't know why he feels like fighting with him. Why some part of him violently reacts against that.

Sirius steps forward, hand reaching out, and Remus doesn't move. Not away, not towards, letting Sirius cup his face. "Let me take this huh?" he says softly, eyes sad. "Just like you said, let me carry it. It's mine anyway."

Remus feels something choked at the back of his throat and he leans too much into Sirius's touch. "I thought I knew how to live with this thing inside me but those memories make it so fucking hard."

"You're not a monster Remus, not now and not when you turn."

"I'm dangerous," Remus pushes back, voice thick. "That's why we're here, why there's a Whomping Willow on the grounds. To protect you all from me."

"To protect us from you and you from us," his thumb strokes Remus's cheek. "We're all dangerous Remus. I was dangerous when I told Snape how to find you, he was dangerous

when he came in here with his wand raised. You think anyone in that castle is safe a hundred percent of the time? All of us have wolves Moony. All we can do is try and keep them on their leashes.”

Remus laughs wetly, sniffing as he looks up at Sirius. “Thank you,” he hears himself say, words barely there.

Sirius smiles sadly before his hand slips down from Remus’s face to his shoulder, pulling him into a hug, both of them holding on tightly, as though worried the other will disappear if they don’t.

It goes on too long.

Remus knows he should pull away.

He doesn’t.

“We should probably head back,” Sirius says eventually, breath brushing against Remus’s ear. “I think we’re cutting it close.”

No, Remus almost says. Not yet. I don’t want to let go yet.

But, of course, he has to.

Remus wipes at his face when they part, happy to find it dry. “Thank you for coming with me,” he says, even though there is so much else to say.

“Of course,” Sirius nods, and then, a little sheepishly; “I’d do anything for you Remus.”

Which is a cruel thing to say in Remus’s opinion. Because it isn’t true, but he thinks that Sirius wants it to be. Wants to believe that he would do anything for Remus. Which hurts more in the end. Of course Remus doesn’t say any of that. Instead he just nods, aching as he follows Sirius back out into the sun.

If Remus and Marlene thought they were going to get away with torpedoing a date arranged by Mary Macdonald they were sorely mistaken. For the rest of the weekend it’s all Remus hears about every time he’s even remotely in her vicinity. And judging by Marlene’s tone on Sunday evening she’s had it just as bad.

“Mary, please give it a rest.”

The upper year Gryffindors have monopolized the common room, with Mary glaring at anyone who dares to try and sit on one of the sofas near them.

“I’m just saying—“

“We know what you’re just saying, you’ve said it. I promise you, Remus didn’t ditch me to hang out with Sirius, if anything, I ditched him,” her cheeks heat slightly as she gives Dorcas

a brief look and then turns away again.

Mary throws her hands up. “You two are unbelievable.”

“To be fair, you’ve never been a very good matchmaker,” Lily pipes up.

Mary’s eyes narrow. “Excuse me? I’m an amazing matchmaker.”

“Remember that time you made me go out with Michael Kitchum?”

“I’m sorry?” James sputters. “You went out with Michael Kitchum? That guy’s like the biggest tool I’ve ever met. And he’s not even in Slytherin.”

“I know,” Lily says solemnly. “He was even worse than you.”

“Oi!”

“Merlin,” Marlene laughs. “I forgot about that. You didn’t talk to her for a week afterwards!”

Mary waves her hand dismissively. “Okay, so I made ONE miscalculation.”

“There was also that time when—“

“HOW was your date Peter?” Mary talks over Marlene who smiles in triumph, catching Remus’s eye and giving him a wink.

Peter has a dreamy look on his face. “It was brilliant, she’s amazing.”

“Aw,” Dorcas says from beside Marlene. “Cute.”

“We’re going to hang out again tomorrow at lunch.”

“What?” James demands. “Peter, mealtimes are sacred!”

“Are they?” Remus asks.

“Family bonding!” James shouts, as though that makes any sense.

“I’m sorry, you’re just making this up. This is not a thing,” he turns to Peter. “This isn’t a thing, right?”

Peter shakes his head but before he can speak James cuts across him.

“Padfoot are you hearing this? Petey’s abandoning us at lunch of all times!” James says in mock outrage, Lily trying to hide her laughter beside him.

“What’s so special about Lunch?” Peter demands.

“What’s so special about lunch—I can’t—Pa—Sirius, hello? Help me out here!”

Sirius blinks, “Sorry?” he swipes a hand over his face before turning to James. He’s been in a weird mood since they got back from the shack.

James quirks his brow. “Wow, you’re really spacing out over there huh?”

“Yeah, sorry, just feeling a bit...anyway,” he shrugs.

“Well, while you were daydreaming Peter announced that he’s throwing us over for some floozy.”

“Her name is Rebecca!”

Without a word Sirius reaches over and cuffs Peter on the back of the head.

“Ow, what the hell!”

“Where’s your loyalty Wormtail?” Sirius demands. “Bitches before witches.”

“Wait, hold on,” Lily says, still laughing. “Does that make you three the bitches?”

“Absolutely,” Sirius answers without hesitation.

“Sirius, darling,” Mary leans forward. “I feel like maybe you don’t know what that word means.”

“I have a fairly decent grasp on the definition,” Sirius counters. “I’ve always been partial to female dogs, very loyal creatures.”

And just like that the girls are giggling and James is giving Sirius a playful kick, and everything is back to normal. Except Remus can still see the tightness at the corners of Sirius’s eyes. He knows he put it there. That that was the plan. He just wonders if he can live with it now.

“Honestly,” Peter is saying, and Remus realizes that the conversation has been going on while he’s been in his head. “I think I’m in love with her.”

James and Sirius both start booing, though they smile while they do it, James reaching over and mussing Peter’s hair, Sirius jabbing him in the stomach.

“Peter it’s been one date,” Mary says, as the boys’ chirping dies down. “Do try to pace yourself, or you’ll scare the girl away.”

Peter’s face is bright red. “Well I wasn’t going to tell HER that,” he mumbles.

“Uh-huh,” Sirius leans back against the sofa. “Sure you weren’t. Mary’s right, you gotta play hard to get.”

“Nah, fuck these guys,” James is still laughing a little. “You think you love her you tell her, she can’t handle it she’s not the girl for you.”

“Gosh James, I didn’t know you were such a romantic,” Lily says, only half-joking Remus reckons.

James looks over at her, brow arched. “You didn’t?”

“Yeah, you didn’t?” Sirius concurs.

“He’s like the biggest sap I’ve ever met,” Marlene adds.

James laughs, looking over at her and bowing his head. “I’ll wear that title with pride McKinnon.”

“Romance is for optimists,” Mary declares confidently.

“Oh yeah?” Lily asks. “What’s for the skeptics then?”

Mary smiles. “Sex mostly,” her eyes go to Sirius, “isn’t that right?”

He salutes her. “Absolutely.”

Remus remembers the first time he saw Mary and Sirius together, remembers the raw, all consuming jealousy that had bubbled up inside of him. Partially because she was touching him, and partially because he knew that he would never be able to fit with Sirius the way that Mary did. Never be able to look...right. And he suspects Sirius knows it.

That thought forms a rock in the pit of his stomach and suddenly he finds himself clearing his throat. “Well,” he says, “as much as I love you all, I really need to go finish my Charms essay.”

A general chorus of boos emanates from the group around him.

“Aw, come on Moony!” James whines, “Don’t go, finish it tomorrow.”

“It’s due tomorrow,” he says as he gets to his feet, the whole time feeling Sirius’s eyes on him, hot and intense in a way that Remus knows he can’t look at directly or it’ll take him apart.

“Remus—” Marlene begins but Remus waves her off.

“I know, I know, you’ll all miss me terribly but I’m sure you’ll survive a few hours on your own.”

“I don’t know about that,” James says skeptically. “If you go who’s going to stop Wormtail from proposing marriage to the girl he just met?”

“Oi!” Peter objects indignantly.

“I’m sure you’ll manage.”

Sirius is still looking at him. Looking at him and not saying anything and Remus doesn't know what's going on but the attention is starting to make him feel jumpy.

"Alright, well, night Remus," Lily says.

"Yeah night."

Remus smiles tightly before turning around, hoping that when he's alone he'll be able to shake off this feeling, but he barely makes it to the stairs before Sirius's voice pulls him back.

"Remus?"

There's something about the way he says it. Something desperate, that has Remus turning around right away.

Sirius is already on his feet, walking towards him.

"What is it? What's wr—"

But he doesn't get to finish his sentence. Because Sirius's hands take his face between them and Sirius's mouth swallows up his voice.

For a second Remus can't breathe. Can't think. Certain he's hallucinating. Except that Sirius's touch is too warm and steady to be all in his head, his lips pressing too heavily into Remus's own. And then he feels himself wake up, feels his body come to life, and madly, stupidly, he starts kissing Sirius back. One hand running through the hair at the nape of his neck, the other going to his lower back. Remus's world suddenly becomes no bigger than the parts of him that Sirius's touches. His whole life reduced to a sensation. To a single thought;

Please.

Don't stop.

Don't let go.

Don't leave me again.

Please. Please. Please.

Sirius pulls back, hands dropping to clutch at Remus's shirt, both of them breathing heavy. "I wanted to."

"What?" Remus asks, dazed.

Sirius's eyes are ablaze, and Remus can't look away. "That's why I kissed you. I wanted to. I want you. I know it's been too long—that I've fucked up—but I want you. I always have."

Those words thrum through Remus, shaking his whole chest. He feels the familiar fear that's been there every time he's looked at Sirius since the incident last year. But it's duller now,

fighting back against all the parts of Remus that crave Sirius. That reach for him like he's the sun.

"Have me then," he can barely believe the words come out of his mouth.

Sirius's face breaks into a smile, it's open and vulnerable and Remus wants to taste it. So he does.

"Have me," he whispers into Sirius's mouth. "Have me, have me, have me."

"Remus—"

Suddenly there's noise—a lot of bloody noise—and both Sirius and Remus look up to find their friends on their feet—James is actually standing on the sofa—cheering like Gryffindor has just won the cup. The only person who looks surprised at all is Peter, but he's clapping too, if not a little less enthusiastically.

"Think our friends will be okay with this?" Remus mumbles, bemused.

Sirius laughs before dropping his head into the crook of Remus's neck and that—even that small gesture—sets fires in his chest.

"I think they'll learn to live with it."

Before Remus has the chance to say anything else James is off the sofa and practically tackling them both to the ground.

"Merlin you two are idiots," he says as the three of them stumble backwards.

"James—really?" Remus laughs, trying and failing to push his friend off.

"Group hug!" He hears Marlene shout and then, before he has the chance to break free, he feels the weight of another five bodies collide with them, sending all of them to the floor in a tangled mess of limbs and laughter.

Somehow, in the chaos, Remus manages to find Sirius's eyes again.

Okay? Sirius mouths.

And Remus feels himself smiling too big, normally he would be embarrassed but he can't find it in himself to care right at this moment, so instead he leans forward, kissing Sirius quickly on the mouth, sparks shooting through him when Sirius's hand comes up to his neck, stopping him from pulling away.

"Perfect," he murmurs against the other boy's lips. "I'm perfect."

It all feels a bit like a dream. Even after everyone goes to bed. Even after Sirius sneaks over to kiss him goodnight. Even after he's finally able to get himself to calm down enough to

sleep. None of it feels real. This sort of thing—it doesn't happen to Remus. It happens to James, maybe even Sirius, but not him. He isn't the main character of the story.

“Moony?”

His eyes blink open, the first cracks of morning light filtering into the room, and Sirius is on top of him, smiling, hair tussled.

“There you are.”

“What time is it?” Remus croaks, voice heavy with sleep.

“Early,” Sirius whispers. “James just left for practice.”

“Really early then. Especially for you.”

“Yeah, well,” Sirius's eyes drop down to Remus's mouth and he feels his stomach flip. “I was going to go back to sleep. But then I remembered that I get to do this now,” and then he bends down, bringing their mouths together, messy and desperate and warm.

Please,

Remus almost moans out loud.

Don't stop.

Don't let go.

Don't leave me again.

Please, please, please.

Because he knows deep down that this was never supposed to happen to him. He isn't the main character of the story. But he wants it anyway.

“I'm just saying,” Peter hisses, as they slide into their seats in Potions. “If you're going to start...doing stuff...in our room, you could at least use a bloody silencing charm.”

“Oh leave them alone Wormtail,” James says as he pulls out his textbook.

Peter looks mutinous. “Easy for you to say, you didn't have to listen to them.”

“Merlin Peter,” Sirius rolls his eyes, looking far too pleased with himself. “We were only snogging.”

“Still gross.”

Sirius pushes his chair back so that he's balancing on its hind two legs, arms behind his head. Just under his collar Remus can see the mark he left on him this morning and a ridiculous

flush rushes through his whole body. Sirius catches him looking and winks.

“Sorry Peter,” Remus says, when he’s able to make himself speak. “Won’t happen again.”

“The hell it won’t,” Sirius mutters under his breath, causing James to snort.

Remus is just about to tell them both off when he notices Professor Slughorn walking towards them.

“Mr. Lupin?” he says as he stops at their table.

“Er—good morning Professor,” Remus isn’t entirely sure what’s going on. “Sorry, were we being too loud? We weren’t aware class had started yet?”

“No, no,” the older man shakes his head. “Professor McGonagall would like to speak with you in her office. She said to take your stuff and not to expect you back.”

Remus blinks. “Oh.”

Slughorn smiles a little. “She did not give me the impression that you were in trouble so there’s no need to look quite so frightened.”

“Right,” Remus lets out the breath he wasn’t aware he’d been holding. “Thank you Professor.”

“Not a problem.”

Slughorn heads back to the front of the class while Remus reaches for his bag.

“What’s this about then?” Sirius asks, chair slamming back down onto all fours. “You curse someone else Moony?” he asks with a grin.

“You’re turning into a right little bad boy aren’t you?” James adds, causing both him and Sirius to snicker.

Remus rolls his eyes. “You heard him, I’m not in trouble. Must be something to do with Prefect duty. I’ll see you guys at lunch yeah?”

“See Peter?” James nudges Peter with his elbow. “Lunch, that meal we have together.”

Peter rolls his eyes.

Holding in a laugh Remus turns to leave when Sirius’s foot hooks around his ankle. “Don’t get into anymore fights on the way to her office alright? You’ll break McGonagall’s heart if she thinks we’ve finally corrupted you.”

“Hilarious. Can I go now?”

“Yeah alright. See you later bad boy,” and then Sirius gives him a smile that makes tectonic plates shift in Remus’s chest.

All he can do in response is shake his head, blushing furiously as he ducks out of the classroom.

He's in such a good mood that he almost forgets that he's on his way to McGonagall's office. He knows they still have so much to talk about, him and Sirius, so much to get past. But they will. Because Sirius wants him. He wants him. Those words sing through Remus, just like the memory of waking up this morning with Sirius's weight on top of him.

"Come in," McGonagall's voice calls out the second after he knocks. "Close the door behind you please."

Remus is surprised to find her standing in front of her desk instead of sitting behind it and it pulls him up short.

"Professor?" he asks uncertainly. "Professor Slughorn said you wanted to see me?"

She nods. "Yes," there's something in the look she gives him that isn't quite right—it's too soft, almost sad. "Though it's your father who wants to speak with you not I."

Remus blinks, now really lost. "My father?" he repeats dumbly, looking around as though expecting him to jump out from behind some piece of furniture.

Professor McGonagall nods, gesturing to the fireplace just behind her. "He'll be calling any minute now," she walks forward, hand squeezing Remus's shoulder as she passes him. "I'll give you two some privacy."

"Privacy?" Remus repeats again as McGonagall closes the door behind her. He looks back at the office, which feels so much more ominous now that he's in it alone.

Don't panic, he tells himself. It can't be that bad, not if he's only fire-calling. If it was a real emergency he would be here. Just don't panic. Not until you know—

"Remus?"

His father's voice breaks him out of his thoughts.

"Here—I'm here," he moves quickly, dropping down in front of the fireplace and finding his father's flickering face staring back up at him. "What is it dad? What's happened?"

His father looks stern, but then, he almost always does. "Is McGonagall there? Did she tell you anything?"

Remus shakes his head. "No, she's gone. Just said you wanted to talk to me." And his father never wants to talk to him, not even when they're in the same house.

Lyll lets out a heavy sigh, hand coming up to rub his forehead. "It's your mother," he says finally.

Remus feels something cold run down his spine. It drips around his heart, fills his lungs.

“What happened? Where is she?”

His father sighs again, dropping his hand. “She’s dead Remus.”

For a second, one second, he thinks his dad is joking. Not that it’s a very funny joke, and really, this is a bit of an elaborate set up. But that’s the only way his brain can make sense of what his father is saying. Because his mother isn’t dead. She just isn’t. She can’t be. There’s no reason for her to be. His father, sure, his job is dangerous, he has enemies. But his mum? All she does is live in their cottage and bake and send Remus about fifty letters a week and it’s annoying but mostly it’s sweet, because he knows she’s just doing her best. And he loves her for it. He loves her. His mum. His mad overprotective mum. He loves her and really, she’s all he has, if you think about it. So she isn’t dead.

She isn’t.

She isn’t.

“I don’t understand,” he manages to say eventually, but his father is already moving on.

“The funeral will be Thursday, McGonagall is going to organize a Portkey so that you can come, I’ll write to you with the time. She said you could come home until then but I told her no, I’m just going to be at work the whole time so I can’t see the point.”

“Dad,” he chokes out, when what he really wants to say is stop. Stop now please. You’ve made your point, whatever sick point it was. I want to see her. I want to see my mum. I need to. I love her. And she isn’t dead. So. I need to see her.

“What happened?” is what makes it out of his mouth.

The silence stretches on too long.

“There was an accident,” his father says finally, almost grudgingly. There’s no hint of emotion in his voice, hasn’t been the whole time. He talks like this is a business meeting. Remus one of his colleagues.

“An accident?”

No.

She isn’t.

She isn’t.

She isn’t.

“What do you mean there was an accident?”

“She took too much of her medication, bloody muggle stuff. I told her not to bother with it but she insisted,” his father goes on irritably.

Remus blinks, no more equipped to deal with that information than any of the information that had come before it.

She isn’t.

The voice sounds pathetic and grasping.

She isn’t.

“That doesn’t sound like an accident,” Remus says finally, which is clearly the wrong thing to say because his father’s face instantly hardens.

“Leave it Remus.”

“How did she accidentally take too much of her medication dad?”

“I told you to leave it.”

“She was so alone in that house,” and he knows, knows he should stop, but he can’t. The words just keep coming. Words he’s meant to say forever but could never bring himself to. Was never brave enough too.

“You took her away from her family, her friends, you brought her into this world that doesn’t want her and then you just left her. Just left her all fucking alone.”

“ENOUGH,” his father has never raised his voice before but Remus barely hears it.

“How could you do that to her? How could you do that to us?”

“I couldn’t make any of it better,” Lyall says finally. “Not you. Not her. I couldn’t fix either of you. What was I supposed to do?”

Remus stares at him and oh—oh no. He thinks he might actually start losing it now.

“Fuck,” he curls over like he’s just been punched in the gut. Pressure building behind his eyes. “Oh fuck, oh fuck, she’s dead. She’s dead. Fuck.”

“Remus?” he hears his father’s voice distantly. “What’s the matter?”

Which is a ridiculous question given the circumstances. And he suddenly realizes how much he doesn’t want to do this here. In front of him. On the floor of McGonagall’s office. So he tries to pull his denial back around himself, cracked and chipped as it is. Tries to push this all down, just until he can get back to his room. His bed.

“Why did you marry her?” the question punches out of him as he raises his head to look at his father again. Because he’s always wondered. Because suddenly he just needs to know.

“Why did you have me?”

His father watches him for a minute, like maybe, for once, he's actually seeing Remus. "I thought it would be different."

Remus almost laughs. "Well," he says shakily, feeling certain that any minute he'll break down into a million tiny pieces. "Sorry we couldn't live up to your expectations."

"Remus—" and for the first time he almost sounds sorry.

"Good-bye dad."

The face flickers in front of him for a second longer before it disappears.

Remus tries to get up but doesn't make it very far, grabbing hold of McGonagall's desk for support.

His mum is dead.

His mum who tried so hard to take care of him. To be there. To make up for the one time that she wasn't. Who squeezed him so tight sometimes he thought he was going to burst. He's never going to see her again. He's never going to touch her. Never going to hear her sing or see her cooking in the kitchen.

Remus tries to breathe, but there are just so many fucking nevers, they're crowding his chest, filling his lungs. How is he meant to let go of all of that at once? How does he cope with losing all of her at once?

There's a knock on the door and after a few seconds McGonagall steps in.

"Sorry," Remus stutters, reaching down and clumsily grabbing his bag. "Sorry, I'm sure you want your office back."

"Please, it's more than alright, take all the time you need. I just wanted to let you know that you will not be required to attend any of your classes for the rest of the week."

Remus nods stiffly.

"And that I have also had Mr. Potter, Black and Pettigrew excused from their classes as well, though just for today. I expect by now they'll be waiting for you back at Gryffindor Tower."

Remus looks up, meeting her kind eyes, feeling his throat grow tight. "Thank you," he whispers.

"Anything you need Remus," it's a shock, hearing his first name come out of her mouth. "You let me know."

He nods, moving towards the door, desperate to get out, to get to the safety of his own room, but still he pauses before he leaves.

"Really," he turns back to look at her. "Thank you," he's not sure he's ever meant anything quite so much.

She gives him a sad smile. "Of course."

And then Remus is pushing out the door and into the corridor outside.

He doesn't remember much of the walk back to the dorms. Mostly he keeps his head down and tries not to think. He knows that death happens, knows that people get left behind and that they find ways to move on with their lives. He just can't quite figure out how. Because she isn't just dead today. She's dead tomorrow too. And the day after that. And that. And that. She will be dead every day for the rest of his life. How are you supposed to deal with loss that big?

He nearly trips up the stairs to his room, taking them two at a time, glad that everyone is still in class. When he pushes through the door he finds his three best friends waiting. James leaning against his bedpost, Sirius pacing in front of the window, Petter sitting down, legs crossed. They freeze at the sight of him. The room more quiet than Remus has ever heard it. None of the lights are on, the space lit only with the dull morning sun.

Remus can feel himself cracking already. All those thoughts he'd been pushing out rushing in. And he wonders if McGonagall told them what's happened and feels a jolt of fear at the thought of having to tell them himself. Of having to say the words out loud because he's not sure he can.

But then Sirius is stepping forward, pulling Remus into his arms, and he goes willingly, burying his head in Sirius's chest. James is next, then Peter. The three of them holding him together as he slowly starts to shatter and break apart. They keep all the pieces of him, stop them from rolling away, from getting lost. Making sure his grief doesn't do anything that can't be undone.

In the haze of tears and choking sobs Remus discovers the answer to his own question. Because this, of course, is how people deal with loss. This is how they survive their grief.

Together.

Chapter End Notes

Hello beautiful people!

I'm not gonna lie, I'm a little nervous about this chapter, just cause I feel like it does a lot (maybe too much???) but hopefully you liked it!

Thank you so much for all the comments and song recs, love it all!!

Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

TW: Religion (this is not an important plot point at all but I know it's a touchy subject for some and it is referenced a couple times in this chapter so I'm throwing this out there)

ALSO, I realize no one cares but this chapter definitely has a soundtrack and it is: Oh Lightning by Valley Maker, it was on repeat the entire time I wrote this so if you want the vibes it's that.

ALSO ALSO there is Jegulus in this chapter, I know it feels like there won't be but there is I promise (I missed them too)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

PART I: REMUS

The day of his mother's funeral Remus walks into the dorm room to find his three best friends dressed in black suits. He stops in front of the door, staring at them, his own suit heavy on his skin. They're well into fall but the fabric somehow still manages to feel suffocating.

"Where did you get those?" he asks eventually, having to clear his throat to get the words out.

"Have a little faith Moony," James says. "We know how to buy Muggle clothes."

"Lily got them for us," Peter says, earning him an elbow to the ribs.

Remus arches his brow. "She got you three perfectly tailored suits?" he tries not to let his eyes linger on Sirius, on the way the clothes hug his chest and thighs.

"She used magic for the tailoring," James admits. "But—uh—we couldn't figure out the—uh—long cravat things," he tugs on his collar.

Remus blinks, and then; "Ties you mean?" realizing suddenly that not one of them is wearing a tie, making them look rather more like some sort of rock band than funeral guests. He almost smiles.

"Lily didn't know how to tie them and we couldn't find a spell," he shuffles his feet. "Is that okay? Or do we need to—"

"No," Remus croaks. "No, it's fine. It suits you," he blinks a few times, getting the moisture out of his eyes. "So you're coming then?"

James looks taken aback by the question but it's Sirius who speaks first.

"Do you want us there?"

Remus meets his eyes for the first time. His beautiful eyes, on his beautiful face, wearing his beautiful suit. It's too much really.

"Yes," he says softly.

"Then we'll be there."

He thinks about kissing him. Doesn't. But he doesn't look away either, desperate to suck the calm confidence out of Sirius's stare, to steal it for himself.

"Well," James says eventually, "we should get going, we have to be in Hogsmeade by half-past nine for the Portkey."

Remus shakes himself awake. "Right, yeah, um—thank you...for...coming."

James's face softens as he walks forward, hand squeezing Remus's shoulder. "You don't need to thank us. This is what we're here for."

They make their way out of the room, James and Peter up front, Sirius and Remus behind, walking close enough that their shoulders brush.

When they get to the common room Remus is pulled up short for the second time that morning, Sirius landing on the stair just below him, looking up.

"Wow, fantastic job with the suits," Mary says impressed, eyes running the boys over.

Mary, Marlene and Lily are standing in the middle of the common room, each dressed in black and looking very much like they've been waiting for them.

Remus opens his mouth but nothing comes out except a shaky exhale. After a few more of those Sirius reaches up, squeezing his hand until Remus is able to tear his eyes away from his friends and down to his—well—down to Sirius.

"Okay?" Sirius asks.

Remus almost laughs. Almost cries. Finally he manages a nod.

"Well alright then," Mary's voice cuts through the quiet room. "Let's get this show on the road shall we?"

"McGonagall okay with this?" Remus finds himself asking as they make their way out of the common room and towards the front of the castle.

Marlene snorts. "Like Lily gave her a choice."

Remus's eyes find Lily a few paces ahead and he feels his throat grow tight. He isn't sure what he was expecting his friends to do, they hadn't talked about it, but he never could have asked them for this. It's too much really.

As if reading his mind Sirius leans a little heavier against Remus's side, just to let him know that he's there. They're out to their friends but here in the halls it's easier to be a little more... discrete.

It's overcast today, the way it gets in the fall, making everything feel deep and saturated, the air cold. They walk down to the village in silence, Remus isn't sure if that's his fault or not but either way he hasn't got the energy to rectify the situation. Honestly he kind of likes it, just listening to the sounds of their footsteps next his.

The Portkey is set up outside the post office, owls flying out overhead as they gather around the old satchel that McGonagall told them to look for.

"Is your father meeting us here or at the funeral home?" Lily asks gently.

Remus clears his throat. "His letter said here," Lily nods, though he doesn't miss the look she exchanges with Marlene. The Portkey is set to leave in fifteen minutes. Lyall is late. Not that that's all that surprising. He usually is.

"I've never been to a Muggle funeral before," Peter says suddenly, voice sounding overly loud in the silence.

"What? I'm shocked," Sirius drawls, earning him a shove from Peter.

"Boys," James does his best impression of his mother, "don't make me separate you."

Sirius smirks.

"I was just wondering if they were a lot different from wizard ones that's all—like, I don't know, what do you do with Muggles?" Peter turns to Remus who shakes his head.

"I've never been to one either. Never been to any funeral."

"You do know that muggles aren't another species, don't you Peter?" Mary asks, her tone a bit sharper than perhaps is warranted. Pete didn't mean anything by it, but then, he also doesn't have to walk down the halls listening to the Slytherins whisper "mudblood" under their breath.

Peter's cheeks flush pink. "No—I know, of course, I just meant...I always feel a little uncomfortable around them. I never know what to say or—" he cuts himself off, realizing that none of this is making the situation better.

"Just be polite Peter," Lily says eventually, sending him a weak smile. "Let them talk to you about her. People like to tell stories at these things, it helps."

Peter nods, perhaps a bit too enthusiastically. "Thanks—yeah, er, I can do that."

It's at that moment that a translucent hawk sweeps down on them, startling a yelp out of Marlene as it lands. It looks vaguely like a ghost and had Remus not seen it a dozen times before he might have been scared. Still, as it is, his stomach drops.

"Held up at work," his father's voice booms from its beak. "Go without me."

Remus blinks down at the bird, not quite able to accept what he's just heard. Waiting for the second half of the message. The "ha, ha, just joking son, I'll be there in ten." Of course, that doesn't happen. And after a few seconds of silence the Patronus dissolves into nothing but white vapour.

Go without me.

His father does not know that Remus's friends have volunteered to come with him. As far as Lyall Lupin is aware, his son is completely alone.

Go without me.

Remus's chest suddenly feels uncomfortably tight.

"Bastard," Sirius hisses beside him.

"He's scared of them," Remus is impressed by how steady his voice sounds, eyes still trained on the spot where the hawk disappeared.

"Scared of who?" Lily asks.

"Her family."

Sirius scoffs. "Than he's a coward and a bastard."

"Sirius," James admonishes.

"No it's alright," Remus finally forces himself to look up, meeting Sirius's gaze. "Someone should hate him." And it can't be me, he doesn't say. Because he's my dad. Because he's the only home I have left.

Sirius gives Remus a small smile, leaning into his side again as the satchel begins to light up in front of them. Remus takes a deep breath.

"Let's get this over with yeah?"

There's general nodding around the circle as they all step forward and place their hands on the bag, Sirius on one side of Remus and James on the other, like two pillars, holding him up.

If he's being honest, all forms of wizard transport make Remus feel a bit sick. Flooing. Flying. Portkeys. He hasn't apparated yet but he's sure he'll feel the same about that. When his feet slam into the pavement of the London suburb he feels the entire contents of his stomach enter his esophagus.

“Steady on,” Sirius whispers beside him, one hand on his hip, the other on his shoulder. Remus can’t tell if his hands feel so good because this is new or because it’s old. Sirius has never been stingy with his touches. With affection in general, at least not in superficial ways like this. Peter once suggested it was because he wasn’t hugged enough as a kid and James shoved him off the bed.

“You know where we’re going?” James asks now, Remus blinking up at him through the haze of his memories.

“Yeah,” Remus had been looking up the funeral home on the city map every hour since his father wrote to him with the time and place. In theory he shouldn’t have needed to, in theory his father should have been here to guide him there himself, but then, maybe some subconscious part of Remus had always known that that was never going to happen.

“Yeah,” Remus repeats, voice a little stronger this time. “I know where we’re going.”

It’s a surreal experience, walking through the Muggle suburb with his friends. They feel so loud even though they barely speak. Like every person they pass, every house, knows they don’t belong.

Don’t you belong?

Asks the voice in his head. He isn’t James after all, isn’t Sirius. He’s just as much Muggle as he is Wizard. Except it doesn’t feel that way. He barely knows the Muggle part of himself.

His feet stutter as the funeral home comes into view—an unassuming building, made of redbrick and wood doors, a manicured garden in front, a parking lot full of cars he doesn’t recognize wrapping around the back. His friends stop behind him.

“I can’t do this,” the words are out of his mouth before he can stop himself.

“You don’t have to,” James says, at the same time that Sirius says; “Yes, you can.”

Remus lets out a dry laugh, because doesn’t that just sum the two of them up? James always so willing to shield you, Sirius always so willing to put the sword in your hands. He finds himself turning to Peter, who stands with an uncertain look on his face, hands in his pockets.

“What do you think Pete?”

Peter’s eyes widen slightly at being asked, looking from James to Sirius and then back to Remus. “I think whatever you want to do is what your mum would want you to do.” Which is both sweet and unhelpful but that’s Peter for you.

Remus stares down the building in front of him, wishing he was somewhere else. Wishing he was someone else. It’s not a new dream.

“Okay,” he says eventually, forcing himself to relax, to breathe. “Okay. Lets go in.”

Sirius squeezes his shoulder, Lily coming up beside him and taking his hand. He looks at both of them before letting out another shuddering exhale and stepping forward.

The inside of the building is beige. Beige carpet, beige wallpaper, beige furniture. It smells vaguely of rose potpourri and egg sandwiches and Remus almost immediately wants to turn around and head back out. He doesn't belong here. He's not entirely sure where he does belong but it's definitely not here, not in this room where it feels like you can't touch anything, full of people he doesn't know.

"Remus?"

He looks up and sees his aunt Mariam walking towards him, he hasn't seen her in years but when he was little she used to visit in the summer with her two kids and her husband. He never noticed before how much she looks like his mother. He squeezes Lily's hand and she squeezes back.

"Oh honey it's good to see you, I was beginning to worry you'd gotten lost," she pulls him into a hug that's too tight, but he doesn't bother fighting it. Eventually she pulls back, hands still resting on his shoulders. Her eyes are sad, red rimmed, clearly she's been crying. Remus doesn't know what he looks like. He hasn't cried since the day he found out.

After a few seconds she starts scanning the small crowd around him. "Where's your father?" she doesn't quite manage to keep the bitterness out of her voice.

Remus clears his throat. "He—uh—he got held up at work." He hates his father for not giving him a better excuse.

Her gaze comes back to him. "Held up at work?" she repeats. "They couldn't let him go for his wife's funeral?"

Remus shrugs helplessly and he sees her expression soften again.

"Well...nothing to be done about it I suppose," she pulls him forward, kissing the top of his head, all rather familiar for a woman he hasn't seen since he was nine. "Come on, the family's waiting in the room just over here, the ceremony will start in a few minutes. Your friends can go take their seats," she smiles weakly at them over Remus's shoulder, her eyes pausing on Lily. "Unless your girlfriend wants to come with you? Sarah might make a fuss, but she always does."

For a second Remus considers going along with it just so he won't have to be alone. A second too long apparently, because he feels Sirius go stiff.

"Um," Lily says awkwardly. "I'm not his girlfriend."

"Oh," his aunt laughs. "Sorry I just thought..." she looks down at Lily's hand, the one Remus has been clinging to for dear life since they first walked in. "Well, anyway, you can all go in, Remus will join you at the reception afterwards."

"Are you sure I can't sit with them?" Remus says, the collar of his shirt suddenly feeling too tight.

“Don’t be silly Remus, you’re her son,” as though that means anything anymore. “Besides, you have to be up at the front with us to give your speech.”

Ah.

Right.

That.

Part of him had been hoping they’d forget about the speech. The parchment in his pocket feeling like an anchor, dragging him below the tide.

“Right,” he manages finally.

There’s a beat of silence.

“Okay well, we’ll see you soon yeah?” James says, squeezing Remus’s shoulder as he passes, Peter following closely behind, sparing Remus a sympathetic smile.

“You’ll be alright,” Lily whispers, giving him a quick kiss on the cheek.

“What she said,” Mary kisses him too before following after Lily, Marlene at her side.

Sirius drags behind, eyes flicking up to Remus’s aunt who’s still hovering behind him, a friendly smile on her face. Eventually, after giving up hope that she’d get the hint and give them some space, he reaches out and circles Remus’s wrist with his fingers.

“I’m right here okay?” he whispers.

Remus nods. “Yeah okay.”

“You can do this Remus,” he leans in so close their foreheads are almost touching and Remus closes his eyes briefly, breathing in the familiar scent of him.

“Okay,” Remus repeats.

And then Sirius is pulling away, disappearing through the doors into the chapel.

“Your friends seem lovely,” his aunt says as he turns to face her.

He tries and fails to smile back. “They are.”

She guides him down a short hallway filled with generic paintings of landscapes and still life's. Everything about this place makes his skin itch. It’s too...soft. Coddling. As though muted colours and perfume will take away the sting of losing his mother. Besides, Remus has never been good at soft. He’s all claws and teeth and scars.

“Here we are,” Mariam says as she opens a wood panelled door.

The room inside is no better than the rest of the building, worse maybe, if you take into consideration the dozen or so people dressed in black who all turn towards the door as they

enter. He feels himself freeze, Mariam's hand coming down on his shoulder and giving it a squeeze.

"Everyone, this is Remus," she says, as cheerily as she can manage.

He's seen some of these faces before—Mariam's children, his grandmother, his aunt Sarah—but the rest of them are strangers.

Jesus, he thinks, looking around the room. Are these people supposed to be my family?

Mariam gives him a light shove into the room.

"Not long now until the ceremony, just make yourself comfortable okay honey?"

He watches her walk over to a man he assumes is her husband, though he doesn't recognize him. He swallows, straightening out his jacket and looking back at the room of somber faces, spotting a coffee cart against the far wall. Not that he drinks coffee but at least it'll give him something to do with his hands. He wonders if Sirius brought a flask with him. It seems like something he would do and Remus could use a shot of firewhiskey right about now.

"What the fuck happened to his face?" he hears someone—one of his cousins he thinks—whisper as he walks past.

He tries not to let it bother him. He knows what he looks like after all. Knows it's shocking to people who haven't seen him before. Over the years he's gotten used to it, but his mum never did. She hated it when people would point them out—hated answering questions, being reminded of where the marks came from. Maybe that's why it stings so much right now.

His hands shake as he reaches for one of the coffee mugs.

"Lyard not showing up then?"

Remus jumps, looking over to find his aunt Sarah standing beside him. If Mariam is warm and kind, Sarah is cold and harsh. She's the oldest sister, with a long thin face and dark hair. You'd never know she was related to his mother, except for her eyes—it's almost unnerving how similar they are.

"Um...no, he got held up at work."

Sarah scoffs. "Seems to happen to him a lot."

Remus does his best not to grimace. "Yeah."

They stand in silence for a minute, Remus playing nervously with the mug in his hands, trying to signal to Mariam to come rescue him. All the while Sarah looks him up and down with his dead mother's eyes.

"Honestly, I wasn't expecting him to come," she goes on eventually, pulling his gaze back to her. "Always was a bloody coward. Never faced up to anything."

Remus wants to feel indignant, but, well, she isn't exactly wrong, is she?

"But then, I wasn't expecting to see you either."

That takes him by surprise. "Me?" he asks. And then, stupidly; "She's my mum."

"Was," the word is sharp, meant to hurt. And it does.

Remus only just manages not to whine like an injured animal. "Was my mum," he corrects himself.

"You've always been more his than her's," Sarah goes on unfairly. Remus isn't sure that would have been a compliment coming from anyone but it certainly isn't one coming from Sarah. "I could have saved her you know," she goes on disdainfully. "I tried to save her. We were so close when we were kids—we were close until the day that psychopath walked into her life. Shut her away in that house in the middle of nowhere. Sucked the life out of her."

Remus puts his mug back down on the table, certain that if he doesn't he'll end up smashing it on something.

"I would have gotten her away from him eventually. I would have made her see sense. I think Lyall knew that," she practically spits on the ground when she says his name, and through his own grief Remus can just make out the tremor in her voice, the way her nails are digging into her arm, the wetness at the corners of her eyes.

"So he knocked her up with you," Sarah goes on bitterly. "There was nothing any of us could do after that."

Without thinking Remus reaches out and grabs hold of the table next to him, holding himself steady. The air suddenly feels too thin, the walls too close, too many people, too many strangers who know too much about him.

He's saved from having to come up with some sort of response by the sound of the door opening, everyone turning as the Pastor enters the room in his black robes. Sarah gives him one last cold look before pulling away.

Remus wonders, as he struggles to get his breathing under control, if that made her feel better.

He hopes that it did.

"It's good to see you all, though unfortunate that it should be under such tragic circumstances," the Pastor—an older gentleman with thinning grey hair and a kind face—gathers everyone around him. Well, everyone but Remus who is still currently clinging to the coffee table. "The ceremony is ready to begin, so once we finish talking I'll lead you all into the chapel, the first two rows of seats have been reserved for the family. We'll watch the slideshow put together by Hope's sisters, and then have her husband and son come up to say a few words," his eyes bounce around the room, looking, no doubt, for the men in question.

“Just son,” Remus forces himself to say, letting go of the table and standing up straight, his skin feeling clammy and too hot. A few people step back so that the Pastor can find him.

“I’m sorry?” the old man asks.

Remus swallows. “It’s just her son. It’s just me.”

“Ah,” thankfully, he doesn’t seem to feel the need to ask anymore questions. “No problem. No problem at all. Now, are we ready?”

There is a general chorus of solemn “yeses” and head nodding.

“Alright then, if you’ll all follow me…”

He leads them back into the hallway, Remus trailing as far behind as he can, keeping his eyes on the floor and off of the faces of his mother’s family. He wonders, absentmindedly, if he’s leaving dirty footprints all over the pale carpet. He hadn’t even thought to wash his shoes and it would be so like him, to scar the funeral home.

“Oh thank Merlin—Remus,” he hears as he enters the lobby, looking up at the sound of his name to find Alice and Frank standing by the front door.

He stops dead in his tracks, everyone ahead of him filing through the wooden doors into the chapel.

Alice rushes forward, instantly wrapping him in a hug that feels infinitely better than the one he’d received from Mariam.

“What—how are you here?” he stutters, slightly in shock as Alice pulls back.

“Mary gave us directions since she lives around here,” Alice explains, Remus had forgotten that Mary’s house was nearby, “Sorry we’re late, we took the day off but Moody still had us doing paperwork this morning,” she rolls her eyes, Remus still struggling to wrap his mind around the fact that they’re standing in front of him.

“But you’re—but the Aurors, I thought—I thought you didn’t get days off?” he stammers.

Frank shrugs. “Family emergency.”

Family emergency.

Those words lodge themselves somewhere in Remus’s throat. The way Frank says them so casually, like it’s obvious.

Family emergency.

“Remus?” Alice asks, eyes soft as she reaches out and squeezes his arm gently.

He shakes his head, trying to get a grip on himself. Everything about this day has been surreal, honestly.

“Thank you,” he manages finally, voice choked as his eyes move from Alice to Frank, trying to make them understand how much this means, knowing that he can’t possibly.

“Oh babe,” Alice pulls him in for another hug and Remus lets her, lets himself lean on her for a minute, soaking up her strength.

“Remus?”

He pulls away, looking over his shoulder to see his aunt Mariam in the chapel doorway.

“We’re about to start,” she whispers.

“Right,” Remus looks back at his friends, reluctant to leave them. “I—er—“

“Go on,” Alice gives his arm another good squeeze.

Frank smiles sadly at him. “We’ll be in there.”

Remus nods, turning away to follow his aunt into the next room, feeling his heart ache as he does.

“Certainly are popular aren’t you?” Mariam says quietly, the pair of them walking down the aisle, pews on either side of them. Her voice is kind.

“Not really,” Remus looks back over his shoulder as Alice and Frank slip in and take their seats in the back row, “just...lucky.”

They slide into the front pew, Remus thankfully on the end so the only person he has to sit next to is Mariam. Part of him wants to know why she’s so nice to him, why she still came around when none of the rest of his mum’s family did. He’s not sure why he never asked before. Why he never asked his mum anything about her family before.

You took her for granted, whispers the nasty voice in his head. You thought she would always be there. Thought she belonged to you. Existed for you.

He clenches his teeth, trying to focus on the Pastor instead of his spiralling thoughts.

“—was a warm, compassionate and vibrant woman who always went out of her way to help others—no matter what,” the old man is saying.

The problem is, Remus had taken his mother for granted. She’d made him her whole life and it had never occurred to him that before he was born, before the accident with Greyback, all that time she spent worrying about him she had filled with something else. With someone else.

“O Divine Master,” the Pastor goes on, “Grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; To be understood as to understand; to be loved, as to love; For it is in giving that we receive; It is in pardoning that we are pardoned; And it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.”

Was his mother religious? He'd never seen her pray, never been made to say grace at the table—not that his father would have allowed it. Far too Muggle. Had she gone to church every Sunday when she was a kid? Did she believe in heaven? Did Remus? He didn't think so, but then, he'd never given it much thought.

The lights dim as a white projector screen is pulled down at the front of the chapel and suddenly his mother's face appears—younger and happier than Remus had ever seen it. Some song he doesn't recognize plays in the background.

His mother has a bob with bangs, she has freckles on her cheeks that are squished up against her sister's face, her front tooth is missing. He barely recognizes her.

"Oh," he hears Mariam coo beside him, looking over to find her face streaked with tears. He wonders what she's thinking about, what memories she has of his mum. All the stories he hasn't heard. And suddenly he has a horrible sinking feeling that everyone knew his mother better than he did.

The pictures fade into one another, his mother slowly growing older—a teenager in floral dresses, her hair down to her waist. A university student at a Christmas party covered in tinsel. Walking across a stage in a cap and gown, holding a diploma proudly in front of her. Remus has no idea what she studied. He never asked.

In all these photos his mother is smiling, face free of the nervous cracks that he'd grown so used to, the ones that never really went away no matter how genuinely happy she seemed. The woman in these photos is beaming. She's light.

The final photo is of his parents on their wedding day. His father is wearing wizard dress robes but they're black and white so they could easily be explained away as some new suit style—or so Remus expects. His mother looks like a painting—hair braided, dress covered in lace, blooming out around her like she's in the centre of a cloud. His father peers at the Muggle camera uncertainly, but his mother is still smiling. Remus wonders if that was the last time she would be that happy. That carefree.

The lights slowly come up again, an older woman hobbling onto the stage behind the Pastor and pulling on the screen several times before she's able to send it zipping back up into the ceiling.

"Well that was certainly beautiful. What a lovely soul," the old man says, looking out at the tear stained audience. "And now, we will be hearing a few words from her son, Remus John Lupin."

Oh.

Remus's heart drops into the pit of his stomach as he feels all the eyes in the room fall on him. He's never wanted to be able to apparate so badly in his entire life.

On shaking legs he rises to his feet, stumbling up to the lectern where the Pastor gives him a fatherly pat on the back before shuffling off to the side, leaving Remus to face the room

alone. His throat feels tight, the air suddenly too dry as he reaches into his pocket and smooths out the parchment he's been clutching all day.

“Um—“ he starts, the faces in the seats in front of him going blurry, he clears his throat, rubbing at his eyes, but it doesn't help. His whole body suddenly feels like it's blurring, something left out in the rain, all his colours running together.

How is he meant to talk about his mum when he didn't even know her? When he'd never tried to? Something starts scratching at the inside of his skin and he brings his hand up to the base of his throat to keep the sobs from being able to escape. He just needs another chance—to speak to her, to listen, to let her tell him all the stories he never asked about. Never made her feel important enough to share.

He's been standing up here silent for too long, he tries to open his mouth again but quickly shuts it, afraid of what might come out. He should have told them this was a terrible idea—he doesn't give speeches, doesn't cut himself open in front of crowds of strangers. I mean, God, he can barely open up to the people he trusts.

He grips the lectern like it's the last life raft in the middle of the ocean, forcing himself to look at the page in front of him. To say something.

Then, in the distance, he sees someone get up. Three someone's, actually. Silently, James, Sirius and Peter make their way down the aisle, like it's the most natural thing in the world. Not one of them looks uncertain, or like they aren't sure whether or not it's allowed, and Remus watches them. Desperate.

The minute they're close enough Sirius's hand finds his lower back, James's on his shoulder, Peter's circling his wrist, the three of them crowding around him. Remus feels himself sag into their touches. Into the warmth of their bodies. The comfort of it.

Home, he thinks.

This is home.

They don't speak. They don't need to.

With a shaking inhale he looks back down at the page in front of him, words slowly coming into focus. Remus swears he'll never love anyone or anything as much as he loves the three boys currently holding him up.

“My mum,” he hears himself say finally, words filling up the room, “liked to sing Billie Holiday when she baked.”

The reception is in a small room connected to the chapel. The coffin is in there. His mum. His mum's coffin. Remus doesn't look at it. Instead he looks at the dozen or so tiny triangle sandwiches on black plastic trays.

“Damn,” he hears James whisper across from him, Remus looks up as his friend runs a flustered hand through his hair. “I didn’t know this many sandwiches existed. Are sandwiches some kind of a major food group for Muggles I wasn’t aware of?”

Remus snorts.

“Except they don’t have peanut butter and jelly,” Peter says morosely, picking up a ham sandwich and glaring down at it.

“Really?” James’s eyes start scanning the table in front of him. “Seems like an oversight on their part.”

“Honestly, it’s the best one.”

“Agreed.”

Marlene, who is currently standing next to Peter, rolls her eyes. “You two are idiots.”

“Oi!”

Remus smiles despite himself, not really paying attention to the food he’s putting on his plate, he doesn’t expect he’ll be eating any of it, he just wants something to do with his hands.

Sirius gives him a nudge with his elbow as they move away from the table, leaving James and Peter to bicker about what the perfect ratio of jelly to peanut butter is.

“You doing okay?” Sirius asks quietly, leaning against the wall next to him. People mill about around them, making small talk, the constant hum of “I’m sorry for your loss” filling the room. Remus hates that phrase; “I’m sorry for your loss.” It doesn’t mean anything. Doesn’t make anything hurt less.

“Hey?” Sirius nudges his foot.

“Sorry,” Remus blinks, eyes going to the coffin behind them and then instantly down to the floor. He’s not sure if he feels like crying or laughing. “Is this supposed to help?” he asks eventually.

“Is what supposed to help?”

“Being here. Doing this. Is it supposed to help? Because I don’t feel any better—I don’t feel like I have closure or whatever the fuck this is supposed to be. It’s just—” he shakes his head, “It’s like I’m being crushed by something. By the weight of this.”

Sirius is silent for a moment. “I don’t think anything helps,” he says eventually, causing Remus to look up. Sirius is watching him, eyes full, overflowing, but with what Remus can’t tell. Something like affection but...more. “This is a big hurt Moony.”

Remus laughs at that. “A big hurt,” he repeats, scrubbing at his eyes with the hand that isn’t currently holding a paper plate full of food he doesn’t want to eat. “That sounds about right.”

“Stuff like this...” Sirius shrugs, hands slipping into his pockets. “It doesn’t get fixed. Doesn’t get...put down, not for a long time. You just learn how to carry it.”

Remus looks at him for a minute before shaking his head. “Jesus, Sirius Black when did you get so wise?”

That brings a smile to Sirius’s face that brightens the whole room. “Oh I’m sorry, I thought you knew, I’m kind of a genius.”

Remus snorts. “Dumbledore better watch out.”

“Pfft, that old hack? He ain’t got nothing on me.”

And suddenly Remus feels the desperate need to be closer to him, to wrap himself in Sirius’s smell and his warmth and his weight. He can’t, of course, not here in some Muggle suburb surrounded by his mother’s potentially religious family who already hate him. So instead he settles for pushing his foot into Sirius’s.

“Thanks for coming, for doing this, I know it’s...not the most convenient thing.”

Sirius gives him a weird look. “Remus,” he tilts his head a little closer. “It wouldn’t matter if her funeral was on the top of bloody Mount Everest, we would still be here.”

Why? Remus almost asks—has been dying to ask everyone all day. Why are you here? It’s how he’d felt first year too, when James and Sirius started sitting with him at meals even when they didn’t go down to the Great Hall together. When they’d include him in their conversations out of the blue. Invite him to join their pranks.

You could be friends with anyone, he’d thought, why on earth would you choose me?

He never did ask.

He doesn’t ask now.

Sirius wouldn’t understand.

Everyone has always wanted Sirius, even when they were kids. Sirius Black walks down the hallway and people look up, move closer. Some kind of primal instinct pulling them in. Even his family, in their own psychotic way, had wanted Sirius. Wanted him desperately. Really, in the end, it was Sirius who hadn’t wanted them back.

Lyall’s voice echoes through Remus’s head:

I thought it would be different.

Remus doesn’t know what his father wants. But it certainly isn’t him. Wasn’t his mother. His eyes go back to the coffin.

“Do you want to see her?” Sirius asks softly, and Remus feels his heart drop.

He keeps staring at the polished wooden box, the top half thrown open, people walking past it like an exhibit at the natural history museum.

“It doesn’t feel real,” he croaks, not looking at Sirius as his throat grows tight. “None of this feels real. I think there’s a part of my brain that still thinks she’s back at home, you know?” He tries to swallow. “But if I see her—if I look at her face—”

“It’ll be real,” Sirius finishes.

Remus nods slowly. “I’m not sure I want it to be, I’d rather pretend she ran away. Finally told my dad to fuck off and now she’s out there somewhere on some wild adventure.”

He likes that idea. His mother on the highway in a red convertible, the top down, a silk handkerchief in her hair. Smiling the way she used to—the way she had in all those photos.

He feels Sirius’s fingers brush lightly against the back of his hand, bringing Remus’s attention back, pulling him in. And then he shrugs.

“Maybe she is.”

PART II: JAMES

Old habits die hard.

It’s not that he’s looking for Lily. At least not consciously. But for an embarrassing number of years he was in the habit of knowing where she was at all times. The map did not help with that obsession. So, if he’s being honest with himself, the reason he ends up outside, walking through the parking lot of the funeral home, is because part of his brain has trained itself to find her.

And he does—leaning against the brick wall by the dumpsters.

“Hell sticks again, really?” he finds himself saying, bringing those green eyes in his direction, a cloud of smoke blowing out of the corner of her mouth.

“I swear I haven’t had any since this summer,” she says, James taking up the wall space beside her.

“Whatever you say Evans.”

She snorts, looking back out at the cars. There’s a cool breeze that pushes against them, moving the clouds overhead, letting beams of sunlight filter through.

Lily looks down at her hand, turning the cigarette over between her fingers. “Being in there,” she says finally, “just reminded me of my dad is all.”

James blinks. “Oh,” because like an idiot he’d gone and forgotten that Lily’s dad was dead. “Are—was his funeral like this?” he nods at the building behind them.

Lily takes a drag from her cigarette, still not looking at James as she tilts her head back and blows the smoke up into the air. The smell burns James's nose and the back of his throat but he refuses to cough.

"I don't know," Lily says finally.

"You don't know?" James repeats confused, pushing his glasses up so that he can rub at his eyes. "Because it was so long ago you mean? Like you can't remember?"

Lily smiles dryly. "No."

James's glasses fall back into place and he stares at her, red hair loose, hanging down her back, freckles paler than they were this the summer. He supposes that's the Scottish countryside's doing. Too bad, he's always liked her freckles.

She takes another deep pull of her cigarette before she continues. "I didn't go to my dad's funeral. Miscommunication or—lack of communication I guess," James has no idea what to say to that, but luckily Lily doesn't let him suffer for too long. "It's hard for Muggles to get in contact with wizards, and it was still all so new to us back then."

Her voice is calm, steady, but her eyes—James feels himself ache for her.

"Shit Lily," he says softly. She's looking right at him now, stare burning, too hot to hold. There were years when he would have done anything for this, to have her attention for even a second. Years when he DID do anything—stunts and grande romantic gestures. The irony, he supposes, is that all he ever needed to do was this.

Eventually Lily looks away again, leaving James a little breathless, like someone who's just stepped back from the edge of a cliff.

"It is what it is," she shrugs.

As Sirius Black's best mate, James can spot a forced shrug a mile away.

"Were you close, you and your dad?"

She bites down on her lip, flipping the ash off the end of her cigarette with the tip of her thumb. James doesn't think he'll ever get over how bloody cool she looks with those things. He definitely can't let Sirius see her.

"Yeah, we were close," she says finally, "as close as you can be with your parents anyway, but..." she trails off for a second, "maybe that would have changed, the longer I spent at Hogwarts."

James feels his brow furrow. "What d'you mean, he didn't like magic?"

Lily laughs, "No, no he loved magic actually. God, I don't know who was more excited when I got my letter, me or him. He was absolutely obsessed, used to make me tell him everything we learned, show him all my school supplies," she smiles scuffing her shoes against the

asphalt. “You should have seen the way his face lit up the first time we went to Diagon Alley, I thought he was going to burst.”

Now James laughs. “He sounds brilliant.”

“Yeah,” she nods. “He was. He saw the—I don’t know—the fun in life, you know?”

“Yeah.”

But then something comes over her face, he’d call it a shadow but that wouldn’t be quite right. It’s something heavy, something that anchors down the corners of her smile.

“It builds walls between you though, between you and the people you love,” she says eventually, looking down at the cigarette in her hand before flicking it off into the distance.

“What does?” James asks.

She looks up at him, green eyes bright. “Going places they can’t follow.”

Lily Evans is a powerful witch, even when she isn’t using her wand. The strength in those words vibrates through James like they’re hands on his shoulders, shaking him.

“I’m sorry,” he finds himself saying, wishing he had more.

Lily only shakes her head, giving him a sad smile. “Don’t be. We all make sacrifices for magic. I wouldn’t change it. Wouldn’t give it back. Not even for my family,” she wrinkles her nose. “Does that make me sound horrible?”

James shakes his head. “No,” and then; “Makes you sound pretty fucking ruthless though.”

That gets a proper laugh out Lily, loud and full, bouncing off the walls around them. “I’ll take it—ruthless—I like that.”

James smiles back. “Good.”

They stand in silence for a minute, both looking out at the parking lot in front of them and the street beyond that, cars speeding along the road like comets. James is always surprised by how big the Muggle world feels, how full of strangers. There’s no anonymity amongst wizards, not really. Everyone is connected to everyone else and if you’re not, well, that’s its own identity.

“How’s Remus doing?” Lily asks eventually, startling James out of his thoughts.

“Remus?” he repeats. “Merlin, I don’t know, hard to tell with him, he keeps everything pretty tightly bottled,” he takes a moment, running a hand through his hair. “He’s doing better than I would be, I’ll tell you that. If my mum was—” he can’t say it. Can’t even think it, a shiver running through his whole body. “Honestly I don’t how he’s still standing.”

“I think Remus expects the worst,” Lily says simply. “Makes it easier to handle when it happens—not easy, but...”

James nods. “He’s been through a lot.”

Lily looks over at him but when James doesn’t elaborate she doesn’t push him for details.

“I’ve been...impressed with Sirius,” he almost feels guilty saying it. “He’s been really good these past few days. He’s helped. I guess—I don’t know—I knew they were sort of a match, but I didn’t realize until this week how much that meant. If that makes sense?”

Lily smiles softly. “Yeah, it makes sense. It’s been nice to watch, the two of them. You can really tell with Sirius, it’s like a weight has been lifted off of him.”

“I think he was suffocating himself for a little while there,” James agrees, hand rubbing at the back of his neck.

Lily looks like she might say something else but at that moment a car comes barrelling into the parking lot, and while James is the first to admit that he knows nothing about cars, this definitely does not seem like the right way to drive one.

“Oh Jesus Christ,” Lily hisses under her breath as she pushes off the wall.

“Who the hell is that?” James asks.

Lily rolls her eyes as the car screeches to a halt in front of them. “Mary.”

Almost at that exact moment the window on the driver’s side rolls down revealing a smiling Mary and nervous Marlene.

“What’s up lovebirds?” Mary demands, looking far too pleased with herself.

Lily ignores her, walking up to the car with James following behind. “What are you doing?”

“We stole my dad’s car.”

“Yes, thanks, I can see that. My question is why?”

Mary rolls her eyes, as though the answer ought to be obvious. “We’re rescuing Remus, clearly.”

“I just want to say,” Marlene pipes up from the passenger seat, “that I told her this was a terrible idea.”

“Rescuing Remus?” Lily repeats, sounding mildly outraged. “Mary, it’s his mother’s funeral.”

In the same tone James adds; “Excuse me? You don’t rescue Remus. He’s a marauder, WE rescue Remus.”

Mary arches her brow, leaning around Lily to look pointedly at James. “Do the marauder’s have a car?”

He scowls. “No.”

“Then it looks like you’re not the hero today Potter.”

“Excuse me, hello,” Lily holds her hand in front of James’s face, stopping him from retaliating. “You both seem to be forgetting that this is Remus’s mother’s funeral.”

“I told her!” Marlene sing-songs.

Mary makes an exasperated noise. “Lily, come on, you saw him in there. He’s miserable.”

Lily looks back at her, clearly waiting for Mary to realize the absurdity of what she’s just said. But, of course, she doesn’t. Lily pinches the bridge of her nose. “Yes Mary, of course he’s miserable,” she sighs. “It’s. His. Mother’s. Funeral.”

“I don’t know,” James shrugs, “I’m with Macdonald on this one. I don’t think being in there is doing him any good.”

“Thank you,” Mary says, eliciting an aggravated groan from Lily.

“You two are absolute lunatics. You can’t just drag him away.”

“Drag?” Mary repeats affronted. “Who said anything about dragging?”

“We’re just going to ask him Lily, Jesus,” James agrees. “Give him the option, if he wants it.”

“Oh he wants it,” Mary says confidently.

“You can’t possibly know that.”

“That’s what I said!” Marlene pipes up again.

James rolls his eyes. “Okay, I’ll just go ask him shall I?”

“No—Jesus—James!” Lily grabs hold of his wrist, her grip impressively strong. “You can’t just—it’s insensitive—you’ll make him think you don’t want to be here.”

“It’s a funeral not a birthday party Lily,” Mary calls through the car window. “No one wants to be here.”

But James looks back at her, making sure she can understand how sincerely he means this; “I’m going to be there for Remus, however he needs me. But I’m telling you Evans, Remus Lupin hates crowds, hates small talk, hates people fussing over him. Everything that’s going on in there is basically the antithesis of what he wants. So I’m gonna give him an out. If he wants to take it great, if not, I will sit in that room for the next week if that’s what he needs. Okay?”

Lily bites her lip, looking only slightly less worried.

“Here here!” Mary cheers from the car.

“Okay,” Lily finally concedes. “Okay, but I’m coming with you.”

James sends her a lopsided grin. “Don’t you trust me?”

Lily huffs out a laugh. “To be tactful? Absolutely not.”

The smell of stale perfume hits James full force as they walk back inside. He’s never been to a Muggle funeral before but he hopes they don’t all take place in buildings like this, as if death wasn’t depressing enough. They walk past a group of women at the entrance who definitely give James the evil eye.

“Jeez,” he whispers as they enter the reception area. “Are all Muggles this suspicious?”

Lily looks at him and then over her shoulder at the women behind them, smirking slightly. “I don’t think they’re suspicious. I just think they don’t like you.”

“Impossible, I’m universally adored.”

Lily shakes her head but can’t quite keep the smile off her face.

“James, Lily!”

James looks up to see Alice beckoning them over to the corner where, her, Peter and Frank are currently huddling, crumb filled paper plates in their hands.

“Now where have you two been?” Alice raises her eyebrows as her gaze bounces between the pair of them in an insinuating manner.

“Merlin Alice, we’re at a funeral,” Lily mutters.

“That’s not quite a denial.”

“Have you seen Remus?” James asks, before the conversation can truly go off the rails.

“He’s over there,” Frank answers, gesturing with his chin at the front of the room where Sirius and Remus are standing side by side at his mum’s coffin.

“Ah.”

Lily shakes her head. “Told you.”

“We’ll wait.”

“James—“

“Lily.”

“Wait for what?” Alice butts in, pulling their attention back to her.

Lily lets out a heavy sigh. “Mary has gotten it into her head that Remus needs rescuing.”

“She’s not wrong.”

“Alice!”

Alice holds her hands up in surrender. “I’m just saying, he looks more and more defeated with every passing second and he wasn’t exactly in great shape to start with.”

“Well can you blame him?” Peter asks. “This place gives me the creeps, especially that thing,” he gestures at the coffin with his half-eaten ham sandwich. For a moment, everyone goes silent and James feels his hackles raise.

He turns to face Peter properly. “That thing?” he repeats, making Peter’s eyes go wide.

“Shit, sorry I didn’t—I didn’t mean it like that.”

“That “thing” is Remus’s mum and if I ever hear you speak about her like that again I swear Peter—“

“James I know, I’m sorry, it slipped out.”

The problem is, James can’t quite see how something like that just slips out. And God, what if Remus had been here? What if he had heard?

“James,” Frank nudges him and James tears his eyes away from Peter to watch Sirius and Remus walking away from the coffin.

“Okay,” he says, not taking his eyes off his two best mates. “You lot go wait by the car yeah? It’s just in the back lot.”

“James,” Lily hisses, moving to his side. “You don’t know if this is what he wants.”

“I have a pretty good idea,” he starts moving, and a second later he feels Lily matching his strides, muttering curses at him under her breath.

“Hey,” James says softly as they meet Sirius and Remus by the wall. Remus is pale faced, blue bruises under his eyes, blond hair almost as much of a mess as James’s.

“Prongs,” Sirius says casually, though James can see the tension in him. It’s hard, watching other people hurting and not being able to stop it.

“So—“

“Listen, Remus,” Lily interrupts him, and it’s work for James not to roll his eyes. Sirius raises his brow but doesn’t say anything. “I just want you to know that this is all up to you, and all any of us want is to make sure that you’re okay—or as okay as you can be.”

Remus looks from her to James and back again. “Er—thanks? Why do I feel like I’m about to get kidnapped?”

“Well, funny you should say that—ow!” James winces as Lily elbows his side.

“Basically, our friends are ridiculous,” Lily goes on, pulling a smile out of Remus, even if it’s only a ghost of what it normally is.

“I’ve noticed that, yeah.”

“And they seem to be under the impression,” she goes on grudgingly, “that you need to be rescued.”

Remus gets that wrinkle between his eyebrows that he always does when he’s confused and Sirius turns to James mouthing: Rescued?

“I don’t understand,” Remus says slowly.

“Well that’s probably because you aren’t insane.”

James rolls his eyes. “Listen,” he steps in, “Mary’s gone and nicked her dad’s car and is waiting outside in the parking lot in case you wanna make a speedy escape—OW!” he rounds on Lily. “Was that necessary? I was literally just relaying the situation?” he rubs irritably at his side.

“It was necessary,” she says, head held high. “It made me feel better.”

Gritting his teeth he turns back to Remus. “What do you say mate? It’s up to you.”

Remus hesitates, looking over his shoulder at the coffin. At his mum. After a few seconds he sighs.

“Fuck it. Lets get out of here.”

“You sure?” Sirius asks, pulling lightly on Remus’s sleeve, bringing his eyes back to him.

Remus nods. “Yeah, I’ve said my goodbyes. Besides, I can’t breathe in this place.”

“Well alright then,” James looks very pointedly at Lily. “Happy now?”

She rolls her eyes. “C’mon, everyone else is already outside, Remus do you need to say goodbye or...?”

Remus’s eyes trail over to the people he’d been sitting with during the ceremony. James doesn’t recognize any of them, can’t remember seeing pictures of them in Remus’s house or ever hearing him talk about any family other than his parents.

Eventually Remus shakes his head, “Nah,” he looks away. “Lets just get out of here, okay?”

Lily nods. “Okay.”

The beauty of Lily Evans, James is coming to realize—well, one of many—is that she always knows when to push and when to let things go.

“FINALLY!” Mary shouts at them as they walk up to the still idling car.

“Are we all supposed to fit in there?” Remus asks.

Now looking at the car properly James can understand the confusion, it can’t be more than a five seater tops.

Mary rolls her eyes. “One day with a bunch of Muggles and you forget that magic exists. Alice cast an extension charm on it, now get in. If we stand here any longer I’m going to be personally responsible for creating a new hole in the ozone layer.”

They slide into the back of the car which has, indeed, been stretched out like a limousine.

“Alright captain,” Alice calls out as James slams the door closed behind them. “Where to now?”

“Seaside, obviously,” Mary says as she starts pulling out into the road.

James turns to Lily for an explanation. “Seaside?”

“Does what it says on the tin Potter,” she leans forward between the front two seats. “Mary, that’s an hour drive.”

“Ha!” Mary scoffs. “Not the way I drive.”

“Why does that sound like a threat?”

“Because it is,” Marlene says dryly.

“I can help too,” Alice pipes up, causing everyone to turn to her.

“You know how to drive?” Lily asks.

Alice laughs. “Absolutely not,” then slides her wand out of her sleeve. “But I know how to make things move faster.”

Beside her Frank is shaking his head. “Moody is gonna kill us.”

“Please, Moody loves me.”

“God, I’ve missed you Alice,” Mary sings from the front seat.

Lily sits back beside James, rolling down her window and letting the crisp fall wind whip through the car. The clouds are almost gone now, just in time to watch the sky start to warm up as the sun dips towards the horizon, pinks and oranges mixing over their heads.

“How long until the last Portkey?” James asks no one in particular.

“Eleven thirty,” Lily answers, and at James’s raised brow; “I think McGonagall wanted to make sure Remus didn’t feel rushed.”

James nods, eyes trailing over to the boy in question who has pulled his tie loose around his neck, undoing the first few buttons of his shirt and dropping his head back against the seats.

Sirius looks up then, eyes meeting James’s. He can read the concern in his friend’s stare, knows that feeling intimately. He’s felt it every time Regulus has come back from Grimmauld, torn apart in ways that James can’t even imagine. And all he’s been able to do is stand there.

Don’t worry, he wants to tell Sirius. We’ll take care of him. Even if we don’t know how—how to put someone back together. We’ll figure it out. We always do.

Marlene flips on the radio and her and Mary start arguing over stations. Alice rests her head on Frank’s shoulder though every once and a while James sees her flick her wand. She catches him staring and winks. Not twenty minutes into the drive Peter is passed out, snoring and leaning dangerously close to Sirius who looks about ready to hex him. Next to James Lily has her head out the window, hair whipping back from her face, sunset glowing in her green eyes. James very purposefully doesn’t look too closely, or think about the way she smells of apples and clean laundry. Eventually he feels his own eyes drifting closed.

“Merlin, he sleeps like a corpse.”

“It’s cause he gets up at five in the bleeding morning.”

“I can’t get him—Sirius can you—“

“Stand aside, let the master work,” There’s rustling. And then: “PRONGS GET THE FUCK UP!”

James startles, clutching at his ears as he sits up, banging his head against the car door as he goes.

“Godric’s balls,” James curses, glaring up at a very smug looking Sirius. Lily is standing beside him, trying and failing not to laugh.

It takes James a minute to realize it’s gotten dark, the car around him empty.

“We’ve arrived then?”

Sirius nods, reaching into the car and clapping James’s shoulder, “We’ve arrived,” and then, as he pulls away; “Might wanna take off your shoes—sand.”

James rubs at the back of his head bitterly.

“Sorry,” Lily starts walking after Sirius. “I tried to do it gently, but you weren’t budging.”

“s’ fine,” he mutters, swinging his legs out of the car and starting to unlace his shoes. Down the beach he can see a fire growing, the blurry outlines of his friends sitting on the ground around it. As far as he can tell they’re the only ones here—wherever here is.

Leaving his shoes and socks behind James walks across the gravelly beach towards his friends, their voices echoing through the night as the dark waves in front of them stretch on endlessly.

“James!” Alice cries out as he gets close. “You’re awake!”

He smiles, dropping down next to Remus, “I am.”

Remus smiles a little, before looking down at his hands. He’s gotten rid of his shoes and socks too, along with his suit jacket, despite the chill. Remus always runs hot, James thinks it’s a werewolf thing but he never wants to ask.

“What’s that look for?” he asks, knocking his shoulder against the other boy.

Remus shakes his head. “Nothing, just...you and Sirius, all day, every chance you get you’ve been...I don’t know, at my side. One of you on each. Like I’m the Queen or something.”

“Pretty sure Sirius is the Queen,” James says, causing Remus to laugh. It feels good, hearing that sound come out of him. The past few days he’s been more or less catatonic.

After a few seconds James nudges him again. “Is it too much? D’you need me to back off?”

There’s that smile again, not quite amused, more...fond. “No,” he says. “No it’s...nice.”

James nods. “Good.”

“—Macdonald you’ve lost the plot,” Sirius is shouting across the circle, the moon now bright in the sky.

“Oh what do you know, you’re not even on the team anymore. Listen, I’m telling you, Slytherin is still our biggest competition.”

“I will not lose to those jackasses again,” Marlene adds bitterly. “Once was enough.”

“Amen,” Frank nods. “How’re you doing so far?” he turns to James now. “Sorry I haven’t been able to make it out to the games, I’ve been trying but...”

James waves him off. “It’s fine Frank, really, you’re off saving the world.”

“We won our first game,” Marlene puts in.

“We killed our first game,” Mary corrects. “Fucking slaughtered Hufflepuff.”

Frank smiles. “Oh yeah?”

James nods. It had been a good game, his first as captain, he was proud of it. “Slytherin won their match too though.” That had also been a good game. Regulus in his quidditch kit never got old. James had barely been able to focus.

“That’s what I’m saying,” Mary goes on.

“Slytherin is all flash,” Sirius insists.

“All your brother more like,” Marlene shakes her head. “That kid is crazy.”

James sees Sirius’s jaw clench in the dim light. “That’s one word for it.” And for a moment he wants to reach over and shake him. Wants to ask him if he knows—knows what they’ve done to Regulus. Knows about Lucius. But he can’t know. Can he? He wouldn’t talk like that if he did.

“Regulus is no better than Marlene,” Sirius goes on. “He just has mommy’s expensive broom. That’s my whole point. There’s no substance on that team.”

James’s fists clench. “Fire’s getting a bit low,” he hears himself say as he gets to his feet, dusting the sand off his pants. “I’m gonna go find us some more wood.”

“Ooh, I’ll come!” Alice says as she gets to her feet too. “Love a good late night beach stroll.”

He doesn’t miss the concerned look Remus sends him and he feels guilt fill the pit of his stomach for making him worry, today of all days. But if he stays he’ll end up saying something he isn’t supposed to. So he starts walking.

“Merlin,” James winces as Alice falls into step beside him, the voices of their friends growing dim. “Is this beach made of sand or rocks?”

Alice snorts. “This close to London? You’re lucky if it’s just rocks.”

James makes a face, looking down at his feet and doing his best to avoid the rubbish. After a few moments of silence Alice bumps his shoulder with her’s. “Hey, you alright?”

“Me?” James asks, looking over at her, “Yeah, ‘course. Why wouldn’t I be?”

She shrugs, Alice has always had the infuriating ability to make everything seem easy. “That was a pretty quick exit back there.”

He grimaces, looking out at the water beside them, hoping she doesn’t notice. “Was it?”

“Worried about Quidditch?”

James huffs out a laugh, “a bit yeah,” and then, “It must seem so stupid to you.”

She looks up at him. “What must?”

He shrugs, hands sliding into his pockets. “Quidditch, Hogwarts, all of it. Now that you’re, you know, out there in the real world. Doing important things. Things that matter.”

“Ah,” there’s another pause, the silence filled by the sound of the waves rocking into the shore. “I saw my first dead body.”

James comes to an abrupt stop, Alice continuing on for a few seconds before she realizes, turning back to him. Somehow even this she makes seem easy.

“I’m sorry?” James finally splutters.

“Moody really does love me,” she goes on, then wrinkles her nose. “Well, not in like a weird way but—I’m good at this. The Auror thing, I know no one thought I would be—“

“Who didn’t think you would be?” James asks, momentarily distracted.

Alice arches her brow. “Oh come on James, none of you were exactly like ‘wow Alice, Auror, I can totally see that for you.’”

“Just because I didn’t see it coming doesn’t mean I didn’t think you would be good at it,” James says defensively. “You’re brilliant.”

She smiles at that, moonlight glittering off the chain around her neck. “Aw shucks, I forgot how sweet you can be.”

He frowns, not entirely sure he wants to be “sweet.”

“I think you were going somewhere before this?”

She nods. “Yeah, I was. I’m good at my job, Moody likes that, so when he needs extra hands he takes me. Frank sometimes too, but, not this time.”

There’s something eerie about having this conversation in the dark, alone on some random beach.

“It was a woman, forty-years old, she has two kids. Well, had, anyway,” there’s a pause and though Alice shows no outward signs of distress James can tell that something isn’t quite right, that she’s holding herself too still, her expression mild, which is rarely something you can call Alice.

“They tortured her, Crucio, for hours Moody thinks, before they killed her.”

James feels a chill run down his spine. “Death Eaters?”

She nods.

“I didn’t read anything—“

“No, well, you wouldn’t have. She was a Muggle.”

“Oh.” And then; “Why her?”

Alice shrugs. “No idea. Because she was there? Because they could?” she pauses, turning to face the water. “That’s the thing that gets me, that they could. No one has any idea who they are, or if they do they’re not telling us. Hell, they might even be Ministry employees.”

James feels his chest grow tight. “Do you know that for certain—that there are Death Eaters in the Ministry?”

Alice nods slowly. “Moody is pretty convinced, he has names but he won’t tell me who.”

“Well is he telling someone?” James can hear the anger mounting in his voice.

She looks over at him, something like pity in her eyes. “Tell who James?” which feels like a punch to the gut.

“The Minister?”

“Jury’s still out on whether he’s one of them or just being manipulated. But he’s awfully close to Malfoy and Lestrage.”

Malfoy.

James feels his fists curl tight, nails digging into his palms.

“Well what are those assholes doing there anyway, I mean they practically scream Death Eater.”

“Like I said, the Minister’s close to them. They’re close to most people,” she lets out a sigh and it’s the closest to defeated he’s ever seen Alice. “We’re pretty alone in there. The Auror department is the last safe haven and that’s only because of Moody, and now Lestrage is trying to petition the Minister for the right to add to the force.”

“What? That can’t happen.”

Alice shrugs. “Shouldn’t happen. But it might. They might replace Moody all together and then...well, I don’t know. We’ll have to go underground.”

James just stares at her, feeling like he’s had the rug pulled out from under him. He knew things were bad, he did, with the attacks in Diagon, outside the Ministry, now apparently on innocent Muggles, but he hadn’t realized—

“So what do we do?” he finds himself asking—begging really. Why hadn’t his dad said anything? Why hadn’t he said more?

Alice reaches out, talking hold of his arm and squeezing. After a few more moments of silence she turns to look at him, smiling a little again. “You wanna know a secret? A good one this time?”

James isn’t sure he can handle the emotional whiplash but he nods anyway.

With her free hand she reaches into her shirt and pulls out the necklace James had noticed earlier. Hanging on the end he sees a ring, the gold band wrapping around blue stones, one large one right in the centre.

“Er...” he looks from the piece of jewellery to Alice and back again. “It’s nice?”

“Frank gave it to me.”

“Cool.”

He watches her bite down on her lip, like she’s holding back a laugh. “It’s his mother’s.”

James continues to stare at her. “Why are you wearing it on a chain?”

“Didn’t seem like the right time today, to tell everyone.”

James still feels like he’s missing something here. “To tell everyone...that Frank gave you a ring?”

“Yes.”

And then.

Then.

Oh.

“Oh my God!” James says suddenly and now Alice really does laugh.

“Ladies and gentleman I think he’s got it.”

“Holy shit Alice, holy shit, are you and Frank getting married?”

“Sh, sh,” she tugs on his arm, still laughing. “Quiet, I haven’t been able to tell the girls yet and I don’t want them to find out by you bellowing into the night.”

James shakes his head, raking a hand through his hair. “That’s—that’s—“

“Mad?” she offers, slipping the chain back inside her shirt.

“Yes, definitely, but also—Merlin, congratulations,” he pulls her in for a hug, squeezing her tight, Alice giving about as good as she gets.

“Thanks,” she says, when they pull back from one another. “Took me by surprise too honestly.”

“Fucking Frank,” James laughs, swiping a hand across his face.

“Yeah, always so reasonable and then one day he just...got down on one knee.”

“And you said yes like the nutter you are.”

She laughs, “Yes, exactly.”

James smiles back at her, “Really Alice,” he says, feeling a little less wild. “I’m so happy for you.”

Something more subdued comes over her, dimming the light in her eyes ever so slightly. “But do you see?”

James blinks. “See what?”

Her hand goes to her neck, grabbing hold of the chain. “This is what we do.”

It takes a minute for James to catch on, to realize that she’s answering his question. He arches his brow.

“We get married?”

Alice smiles ruefully. “Sure, or we worry about Quidditch, or think about the fact that Lily Evans hasn’t stopped staring at us all day,” James rolls his eyes but Alice continues. “People make the mistake I think, when things get hard, of thinking that what they love doesn’t matter, that it’s—I don’t know, a luxury, or frivolous—but I saw my first dead body. My first, not my last. And I can tell you that the only thing that matters right now, is what you love.” She squeezes James’s arm again. “Don’t give them up, the things that make you happy James, just because you think it’s the right thing to do, the heroic thing, because it isn’t. Take what brings you joy and fucking savour every last piece of it.”

It’s terrifying, hearing Alice talk like this—light hearted, good-time, Alice. James is pretty sure he’s never even seen her in a bad mood, yet here she is talking like the world is ending.

“Okay,” he finds himself saying. “Yeah, okay Alice.”

She nods, before pulling him in for another hug.

“Hey,” he says, chin resting on the top of her head. “Since I’m the first person you told does that mean I get to be in the wedding?”

She smiles against his chest. “That’s not how anything works but sure. We needed a flower girl anyway.”

It feels good to laugh. Even if it doesn’t last.

He told Regulus he probably wouldn’t make it tonight. That they’d be back late. That Remus would need him. So he doesn’t know why the first thing he does when they get back to the castle is head in the direction of the Come and Go Room. Muggle suit jacket in hand, shoes full of sand.

He mumbles something to the boys but none of them question it—used to it by now. Besides, they’re all knackered. They barely made it back for the last Portkey and it’s past midnight

now. James doesn't have the map, doesn't have the invisibility cloak, all in all this is a sloppy and pointless mission. But after his chat with Alice—after the whole day really—he just needs to see him.

He steps through the door almost the minute it appears, walking into a dimmer room than usual. Most of the lights are out, but the fire is lit, burning low in the hearth. It takes James's eyes a minute to adjust, a minute to find Regulus curled up on the bed, asleep. Reasonably he shouldn't be here—shouldn't have bothered, and that makes all sorts of feelings bubble up inside of James.

He throws his jacket over a nearby chair, slipping off his socks and shoes as he walks towards the bed. Regulus always looks so young when he's asleep, curled up on his side, hair hiding his face. James goes as far as to crawl on top the mattress but then he stops.

"Reg?" he says gently, wanting to wake him but not wanting to touch him. "Reg? Regulus?"

Regulus's eyes fly open, his hand shooting out in James's direction trying to grab him or push him away, James can't tell which.

"Hey, hey," he says, letting Regulus keep his hand on his chest, holding them apart. "It's okay, it's me, it's just me."

Regulus blinks, his breathing evening out as he pulls himself up to sitting. "I didn't mean to fall asleep," he says groggily, letting his hand drop so he can scrub at his eyes.

"I'm surprised you're here at all," James says, watching Regulus come awake, the sharpness returning to his eyes, offset by his mussed hair and wrinkled clothes.

"I didn't mean to do that either."

James nods, understanding. "Can I touch you?"

Regulus pauses, his whole body going tense, "Give me a minute?"

"Of course," James pushes himself up the bed, adjusting so that he can lean back against the headboard. Regulus watches him the whole time, eyes running him up and down, and James lets him. The truth is, Regulus looks the way most people touch. You can feel his eyes as much as any pair of hands.

"What are you wearing?" he asks eventually, and James can't help but smile.

"Muggle suit, you like it?"

Regulus just keeps looking at him and then, eventually, he reaches out his hand, James holding himself perfectly still, letting Regulus do what he wants. He rubs James's collar between his fingers, slowly moving along his shoulder, down his arm, over his rolled up sleeve, pausing when he reaches his wrist. He hovers over the crossroad of veins there, over James's quickly increasing pulse.

And then his touch is gone. Taken back like a misspoken word. When Regulus raises his eyes to meet James's his gaze is bright, wide awake now.

"Yes."

James blinks, like waking from a trance. "Sorry?"

Regulus's lips quirk up. "Yes. I like it." James feels his stomach flip.

"You wear yours I'll wear mine baby."

Regulus rolls his eyes. "That is not a thing."

"What's not a thing?"

"'Baby', it's not going to be a thing."

James bites the inside of his cheeks, trying to keep a straight face. "I think there are a lot of people who would argue that it already is a thing."

Regulus gives him a flat look. "Yes, well, it's not going to be a thing between us."

"That's what you said about Reg."

"Not the same."

James shrugs, "Sort of the same," and then, because he can't resist, "baby."

Regulus makes a disgusted face before pouncing on James, pushing him down onto the bed. It's usually better like this, letting Regulus be the one to take charge, to decide when and how they touch. James doesn't mind really.

"I'm too nice to you, that's the problem," Regulus says as he pins James's arms to the bed.

"Oh is that the problem?" James laughs.

"One of many."

"Do you have a list?" James is joking but when Regulus doesn't answer his eyes grow wide. "Oh my God, you do have a list?"

"I have lots of lists," he responds noncommittally.

"Lists about me?" James asks, already grinning.

Regulus scowls down at him. "I have lots of lists," he repeats.

"Merlin, you're a nerd about everything aren't you?"

Regulus's scowl deepens. "I'm not sure which is worse 'nerd' or 'baby.'"

“Depends on what you’re into I imagine.”

Regulus rolls his eyes, pulling himself off of James and collapsing down next to him on the mattress. “You’re impossible.”

“I thought I was ridiculous?”

“That too.”

James smiles, turning his head to look at the other boy who at that moment lets out an enormous yawn.

“It’s late, we should sleep. Can you stay here tonight?” he asks, eyes greedy for Regulus’s face. The other boy nods, looking back at him.

“Can you?”

“Yeah.”

“What about Lupin?”

“He has—“ but James stops himself, not that saying that Remus has Sirius would be all that revealing, still, it makes something in his stomach squirm. Regulus is Sirius’s brother and this isn’t his secret to tell. “—he has the others,” he finishes after a brief pause.

Regulus nods, though James can tell his hiccup didn’t go unnoticed. “How was it then, the funeral?”

James exhales, “Fine and also kind of horrible. Lyall didn’t show.”

“Bastard.”

James can’t help but laugh at that—Regulus repeating his brother’s words exactly.

“What?” the younger boy demands.

James just shakes his head. “No, nothing I just—didn’t think you cared that much for Remus.”

“Why, cause he hexed me?” Regulus asks, like it’s a ridiculous assumption to make.

“Sure. That and other things.”

Regulus holds his gaze for a second longer before looking back up at the ceiling. “He thought he was protecting you,” Regulus shrugs. “I’ve been hexed for worse reasons.” That makes something in James’s chest ache. “Besides, me liking or disliking Lupin doesn’t change the fact that his father is a bastard.”

James snorts. “Fair enough.”

He wants to kiss him but he doesn't ask, he tries not to, not after Regulus has already said no. Feels too pushy. But fuck does he want to.

Regulus yawns again.

"Okay, come on, lets go, bed," James rolls off the mattress, undoing his shirt and trousers until he's standing in just his pants. He can feel Regulus's eyes on him again but he tries to ignore it, pulling back the comforter and waiting for Regulus to move. He doesn't. Still sitting at the end of the bed, looking.

"Sorry, d'you want me on the sofa tonight?" James asks, taking a step back.

But Regulus shakes his head. "No—no sorry—I was just..." he shakes his head again, sliding off the bed and kicking off his shoes and trousers but keeping his shirt on. When he looks up again James arches his brow.

"You were just what?" James asks.

"Get in the bed James," Regulus says instead of answering, sliding under the covers himself.

But James shakes his head. "You were what Reg?"

"I don't know, nothing, will you just—" he waves impatiently at the space beside him. But James takes another step back.

"If you don't want me in the bed tonight that's okay, you know that right? Don't say it is just because you think it's what I want."

Regulus glares at him for a good long minute before eventually throwing his arms up in surrender. "You just—you look like that."

James blinks, looking down at himself and then back up at Regulus. "Look like what?"

Regulus gestures unhelpfully at James's torso. "Like THAT. And I got...distracted. Can you please just get in here already? I have potions first period tomorrow and I'd really rather not fall asleep in my cauldron."

But there is no way James is letting this go that easy. "Regulus, you've seen me like this before."

"Yes, I know, and it's always...but this time you were wearing those stupid Muggle clothes, which was bad enough, but then you were taking them OFF and it was...it was all a lot honestly."

Despite his persistent glaring, the tops of Regulus's cheeks have started to go pink and James can't hold it in anymore, he laughs. Laughs so hard he has to grab his knees for support.

"Okay, really? You're being a little much now don't you think?" Regulus says as James wipes tears of mirth from his eyes.

“Merlin, you’re adorable.”

“Careful,” Regulus says in a cold voice. “I will hex you James Potter and I promise you it’ll be a lot worse than a Jelly-leg jinx.”

“Sorry, it’s hard to be scared of you when your cheeks are all pink like that.”

“Okay, that’s it,” Regulus starts reaching for the wand on his bedside table.

“Alright, alright, I’m done, I’m done. I promise,” he swallows down the rest of his laughter as he crawls into bed, the room somehow knowing to bring the lights down with him.

“You really are impossible.”

“And ridiculous.”

“That too.”

James tries to catch his breath, settling into the comfortable bed. One of the many perks of being James Potter is that he has never had to suffer through a bad mattress but this one—this one really is a cut above the rest.

“You can...touch me, if you want,” Regulus says eventually, voice quiet in the dark.

James turns to look at him. “Yeah?”

“Yes.”

James shuffles over, wrapping one arm around Regulus’s middle and pulling him in, the pair curving around one another, James resting his chin on the top of Regulus’s head. He lets himself relish in the warmth of him. Listening as Regulus’s breathing slowly evens out, becoming calm and then almost sluggish as he drifts closer to sleep.

“Reg?” he hears himself say into the dark.

“Mmm?”

James tightens his arms around him. “You make me happy.”

There’s no response, and James is fairly certain that Regulus has fallen asleep until a groggy voice spills into the night:

“You are my happy.”

Chapter End Notes

Hi! Hello! Hey!

I am sorry for the delay with this chapter, I had to move apartments and provinces and then also write a thirty page paper but it's fine, we're FINE, we're alive.

I realize the double perspective was a little weird but hopefully it worked?

Thank you all for the comments and the kudos it's all so nice!

Also, I'm little-shit-soph on tumblr if you ever wanna chat fic or hp or whatever (shout-out to the people who have already found me on there y'all are lovely)

Chapter 25

Chapter Summary

Everything is stressful from here on out.

Chapter Notes

tw: Homophobic language

tw: Violence (blood - I don't think it's too graphic but it's graphic-ish)

tw: Implied/Attempted sexual assault (via Imperius Curse - again nothing is graphic)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

You are my happy.

He hadn't meant to say it. He'd been half-asleep. Unfair of James really, being all sentimental around him in that state.

You are my happy.

He hadn't meant to say it. He had meant it though. In retrospect, that was the real problem. He needed to end this. He knew that. The Mark on his arm a ticking clock. He just couldn't quite make himself let go. He'd never had something like this before—something that was good. Something that was his. So he just kept digging a hole he wasn't sure he was ever going to be able to get himself out of.

“Oi! Earth to Black?”

Regulus blinks as Evan shoves his hand in his face, flapping it around as he tries to get his attention.

“You're intolerable,” Regulus slaps the hand away, earning him a grin.

“I love it when you talk dirty to me.”

“Gross,” Barty is leaning against the wall, his arms and ankles crossed in a way that Regulus knows he thinks is intimidating but is very much the opposite.

“Aw, don't be jealous Barty,” Evan leans close to him making kissing noises, causing a look of utter revulsion to contort Barty's face. He shoves Evan away.

“Merlin, cut that out. People are going to think you’re a fucking queer.”

Regulus doesn’t react. He never does. Staring dully out at the hallway as kids mill about on their lunch break.

Evan rolls his eyes. “I doubt it. Besides, if I WAS queer I’d aim a little higher than you. I do have standards you know.”

“Since when?” Regulus asks dryly.

“Oi!” Evan tries to kick him but Regulus smoothly steps out of the way, the corners of his mouth flicking up.

“I’m serious,” Barty goes on, straight faced. He’s been more of a buzzkill recently. Regulus reckons it’s because his dad got another promotion. “You think the Dark L—“

“Jesus Barty,” Regulus cuts him off, eyes bouncing up and down the corridor, making sure no one is paying attention. “A little subtlety please?”

Barty’s cheeks flush, his scowl growing. “He’s not going to want a bunch of poofs in his order is he?”

Well, Reg thinks flatly, bit late for that.

“I’m pretty sure he has more important things to worry about than who you’re shagging,” Evan claps Barty on the back. “But it’s cute that you think he cares.”

Barty shrugs him off. “You haven’t heard anything have you?” he says to Regulus.

“Heard anything?”

“Y’know, from him, from the others. Anything they want us to do?” Sometimes, the thing on Regulus’s forearm squirms, wriggling under his skin like a real snake. Other times it burns. That’s about the extent to which he’s “heard” from Voldemort.

“No,” he says flatly. “Why would I have?”

Barty lets out a frustrated sigh, turning so that his back presses into the wall. “Fuck, I don’t know. We’re here, we could be useful, get information or something,” he kicks at the ground. “I’m just so bored.”

“Merlin me too,” Evan runs a hand down his face. “Who the fuck cares about Ruins when there’s a war that’s about to kick off.”

“I swear if we’re stuck here when it does,” Barty goes on, looking murderous.

Regulus isn’t sure he’d mind honestly. Easier that way. No hard decisions to make, no danger, just; “Oh there was a Wizarding war? I must have missed it, I was in Arithmancy.” Somehow he can’t quite believe it’ll happen like that.

“We need to do something,” Barty goes on, which sounds like a threat as far as Regulus is concerned.

“And what exactly do you suggest?” he asks carefully.

Barty kisses his teeth, looking agitated as his eyes bounce around the corridor. “I don’t know, just something. Something to get their attention.”

“I’m intrigued Barty boy, go on,” Evan says and Regulus could smack him for encouraging this.

“Preferably not something that will get us arrested.”

Evan rolls his eyes. “Honestly Reg, you have to get over that whole “I don’t wanna get arrested” thing, it’s really holding us back.”

Regulus looks over at him, brow arched. It’s hard to tell with Evan, when he’s joking and when he’s serious.

“Besides, like I said, even if they did lock us up it wouldn’t be for long.” He gives Regulus a playful shove and Regulus shoves him back, not feeling nearly as confident that anyone would come get them out of Azkaban. Their side might have control of the prison but that didn’t mean they’d risk it becoming public knowledge for the sake of three teenage morons.

“Hey, what do you reckon Dementors’ sound like?”

Regulus blinks, trying to catch up to the change in topic. “What do they sound like?”

“Yeah, like are their voices deep,” Evan provides him with a demonstration. “Or high and squeaky?”

Despite himself, Regulus laughs. “I’m pretty sure they don’t have voices at all.”

Evan looks at him skeptically. “Nah, come on, they must—“

“Flipendo,” Barty snaps. Regulus looks over just in time to watch a third year Hufflepuff get knocked off her feet.

There’s a moment of stillness in which everyone in the hallway seems to be in shock, staring at the girl open mouthed. Then she makes a pathetic whimpering noise and her friends go rushing to her side, others looking around to see who hexed her.

“Take that you filthy Mudblood,” Barty smirks as he slides his wand back up his sleeve.

“Merlin Barty, warn bloke next time, will you?” Evan says, dramatically clutching his heart.

To be honest, Regulus doesn’t care one way or the other about the Hufflepuff girl. It’s the stupidity that bothers him.

“Congratulations Barty,” he says dryly. “I’m sure the Dark Lord will be well impressed that you managed to jinx an unsuspecting thirteen year old. Definitely get his attention that. Heck, I’ll be surprised if he doesn’t show up any minute and give you the Mark right here. I mean, who needs to be clever about these things right? Might as well just start doing whatever the hell we want, wherever the hell we want, regardless of who’s around.” He watches the mirth drain from his friend’s face, replaced by bitterness, but he doesn’t care. Their positions are too precarious for idiotic stunts like that.

“Well put Black,” comes a new voice from behind him.

Regulus closes his eyes for a brief moment and groans internally.

“Look who it is Reg, your new best friend,” Evan is grinning a little manically as he comes to Regulus’s side, Regulus turning to find Remus Lupin at his back. The Prefect is not looking especially good at the moment—face pale, heavy bags under his eyes—it’s clear he isn’t sleeping.

Lupin’s gaze remains on Regulus for a second longer before it flicks behind him to Barty. “Crouch, detention and fifty points from Slytherin.”

“For?” Barty asks in the most bratty tone Regulus thinks he’s ever heard. He’s honestly impressed.

The older boy rolls his eyes. “I saw you cast it, not particularly subtle about it, were you?”

Barty’s eyes narrow. “Your word against mine.”

Remus lets out a dry laugh, shaking his head. “I hear that Dumbledore has a pensieve, I will gladly hand over my memory of the event.”

With no defence left Barty resorts to glaring, as though he can frighten Lupin out of punishing him. Regulus thinks that’s unlikely.

“Glad to see that won’t be necessary. I’ll let Slughorn know about the detentions,” he doesn’t look at Regulus as he pushes past them.

“Hey Lupin?” Barty calls out, stopping the Prefect on the his way down the hall.

“Oh, ho, ho,” Evan whispers, elbowing Regulus in the side. “This ought to be good.”

Regulus grimaces.

“I hear that dirty Muggle mum of yours has gone and died,” he smiles cruelly, showing off all his teeth. “See, if I were you, I would have killed her myself years ago. You’d still be a filthy half-blood but at least then you’d have some dignity, you know?”

To his credit, Lupin doesn’t even flinch. Just stares back at Barty stone faced for long enough that the Slytherin starts to fidget. Then he turns around and continues down the corridor.

Evan lets out a low whistle. “Holy shit my dude,” he grabs Barty by the shoulders and gives him a shake. “That was fucked up.”

Barty’s eyes have gone dark, following Lupin’s back as he disappears around the nearest bend. “I meant it.”

Regulus doesn’t have a shred of doubt that that’s true.

“Uh-huh,” Evan slings his arm around him, laughing a little. “Lets go get some food you little psychopath,” he looks over his shoulder; “Reg?”

Regulus nods slowly, eyes on Barty. “Yeah,” he says finally, “yeah lets go.”

Barty is in a shit mood for the rest of the day. Shoving and pushing his way through the corridors, cursing at just about everyone in sight. Evan finds it funny—though Evan finds most things funny—Regulus, on the other hand, finds it grating. Which is why he tells them he’s going to the library after last period, speeding off down the hallway before either of them can say anything about it.

He might actually go to the library, he hasn’t decided. The problem is that he’ll likely run into to Lupin again if he does and he’s not sure he has the patience for that right now. So instead he wanders, keeping to the quieter areas of the castle, away from the common rooms and the Great Hall. Between the end of the school day and dinner the halls are generally pretty empty anyway.

“Well look who it is.”

He stops at the end of the hall, turning around to find a smiling James Potter making his way towards him. His hair is a mess, glasses smudged, robes wrinkled and yet somehow he still manages to be the most attractive person Regulus has ever seen. It’s infuriating.

James quirks his brow as he comes to a stop in front of him. “Reg?”

Right. He’s meant to speak. “Hi.” He wonders if James has talked to Lupin yet, he must have, yet he seems a little too happy to have heard exactly what happened with Barty.

“You okay?” James asks, leaning a bit closer. He doesn’t reach out, doesn’t touch Regulus, he never does unless Regulus says he can. But still. It’s too close for the hallway, so Regulus steps back.

“Fine. What are you doing wandering the halls without your fan club?”

He sees the flash of hurt in James’s eyes at the distance between them but he doesn’t say anything.

“I—uh—was following you actually,” he says, rubbing the back of his neck, and it’s then that Regulus realizes that James hasn’t got any of his school stuff with him.

It only takes him a second to understand; “You saw me on your map?”

James smiles sheepishly. “I saw you on my map,” he confirms.

Regulus isn’t exactly sure what to do with that information. On the one hand, his stomach does several somersaults at the thought of James looking for him, coming to find him. On the other hand, he wonders if he’s the only one at this school with any fucking sense.

“We really shouldn’t be...talking...here,” he says stiffly, eyes doing a quick circuit of the hallway, making sure they’re still alone.

That sucks some of the light out of James’s eyes. Regulus feels guilty, he does, but he also doesn’t step any closer.

“Reg,” James says quietly, “we’ve been together for a year.”

Which seems like a random and irrelevant piece of information to Regulus but he at least knows enough not to point that out. “We have,” he says slowly, wondering where the hell James is going with this and why he feels the need to do it in the middle of the corridor.

“So...I just...I don’t want to do this forever.”

That makes something in Regulus’s chest stammer. It shouldn’t—after all, he’s been telling himself to end things with James for months. If James has decided to do it himself all the better for Regulus. He just...hadn’t seen it coming.

“You don’t want to do this?” Regulus repeats, hating how tight his voice sounds.

“I don’t want to hide.”

“Oh,” the relief he feels is enough to stop him from fully taking in what James is saying.

“Yeah,” James goes on, gaze bouncing between Regulus and the floor, like he’s not quite brave enough to hold his gaze. “I’ve been thinking and, obviously, y’know, coming out to the whole school would be...a lot,” Regulus’s eyes instantly go back to the end of the hallway, and then over his own shoulder. He really—really—does not want to be having this conversation here.

“But maybe we could just start smaller—telling our friends?”

Whatever relief he had felt about James not wanting to finish with him immediately evaporates.

“No,” he says harshly, and then, perhaps TOO harshly; “I’m sorry, but haven’t we already had this conversation?”

He sees James straighten up and he knows this is going nowhere good. Knows he has to rein in his frustration. But that’s never been his strong suit.

“Yeah, we have, and I’ve told you I don’t think you need to be so afraid.”

Regulus grits his teeth. “The answer is no. It’s always going to be no,” he thinks of Lucius back in Scotland, thinks of the hungry look in his eyes.

I’d be careful if I were you,

His voice bounces around Regulus’s head.

Wouldn’t want Bellatrix to find out about your little boy-toy.

“We’re too...” James presses on through the silence. “We’re too big for hiding Reg. You and me,” he smiles a little. “Can’t you see it?”

If she finds out what you’ve been doing and, God forbid, with whom, that poor boy is going to find himself dismembered.

“No. I don’t see it,” this time it’s James who steps back, like he’s just been hit. “Surely you have to know that there’s no other way—not with me?”

But James looks back at him defiantly. “People will surprise you.”

He thinks of his mother. Of Bellatrix.

“No, they won’t.”

James lets out a frustrated groan. “Just my friends then, that’s it, that’s all I’m asking.”

Regulus laughs coldly. “Your friends, meaning my brother?”

“Yes.”

“Merlin, have you lost your mind? No. No James.” He keeps checking over his shoulder, over James’s. God he hates this.

“I think I can talk to him,” James keeps pushing for reasons that Regulus can’t fathom. “I think I can make him understand—“

“Take it from someone who has been trying to make Sirius understand for the last fifteen years—you can’t. He won’t.” And if he makes a scene, if other people find out, if it gets back to their family...God this is so stupid...he’s been so stupid.

“Look,” James lifts his glasses, pinching the bridge of his nose. “I know you’re worried about how he’ll react.”

“You have no fucking idea what I’m worried about.”

He watches James tense at that, clenching his teeth as he lowers his hand. “Then tell me,” he growls. “Tell me what has you so stuck Reg?”

And for a moment he almost does.

They'll kill you. They'll kill me. Hell, they'll probably take out your parents just for the fun of it. I have no choice. I have nowhere to go. I'm putting you in danger everyday and I don't know how to stop. I let them carve him into my skin and sometimes I swear I feel his heart beating overtop of mine.

But he doesn't say any of that.

Instead he takes another step back. "I'm not having this conversation here."

James's face clouds over. "Sure. Fine. Whatever." He turns sharply on his heel, hands shoved in his pockets as he starts heading back in the direction he came from.

Regulus feels a lump in the back of his throat.

Fuck.

"James—"

"Careful Black," James throws over his shoulder. "Wouldn't want anyone hearing you use my first name, they might get the wrong idea."

He delivers the blow seamlessly, doesn't even slow down to do it. It's work for Regulus not to flinch as he watches James round the next corner, disappearing from sight.

"Fuck," he says, out loud this time.

For half a heartbeat he actually considers going after him. But he can't. Can't risk causing a scene, can't risk being overheard, this whole conversation was already dangerous enough. He sighs, scrubbing at his face with his hands. He really can't wait for this day to be over.

Safe to say, when he turns up for Prefect duty that evening he is not in the best of moods. He isn't seeing James again until tomorrow night, and that means that he's stuck just sitting with this—this fight? Was it a fight? Are they fighting? His skin feels itchy, a pit growing in his stomach that he can't seem to get rid of.

It's all stupid. This thing with James was never going to last, he should be happy that it's coming to an end in such a mundane way. Maybe it'll hurt them both less. No need for wars or monsters. Regulus can ruin this all on his own thank you very much.

"Hey!"

He turns to see Cerci walking towards him, smiling enthusiastically—not that she ever smiles any other way.

Regulus arches his brow. "What're you doing here?"

"Wow, what kind of greeting is that?" though she doesn't sound remotely put off.

Regulus tries to adjust himself, shaking out his shoulders, dragging up some amount of good will. “Sorry,” he manages, “bad day.”

“Well it just got better,” she places her hands on her hips, pigtails bouncing on either side of her head. Regulus has never known anyone in real who wears their hair in pigtails before. He always assumed it was a style reserved for cartoon characters.

“Has it?” he asks tentatively.

“I’m on Prefect duty with you tonight! Sarah got sick or something and asked me if I could cover and I was like “heck yeah, I’ll take your shift with my partner” so here I am.”

“Here you are,” Regulus is never entirely sure whether he’s exhausted or amused by Cerci. “You really have to stop telling people I’m your partner.”

She looks at him curiously as they start walking down the hall, away from the Prefect office. “Why?”

“Because people assume you mean something else.” When she still looks confused he tries again; “It makes them think we’re...involved.”

There’s a beat of silence before Cerci starts laughing—almost insultingly loud, in Regulus’s opinion.

“Us?” she chokes, grabbing her stomach. “Oh my God I’m getting a cramp, that’s the funniest thing I have ever heard—you and me? A couple?” she starts cackling again.

Regulus would like to be annoyed but for some reason he finds himself smiling instead. “Stranger things have happened.”

“Merlin, have they?” she wipes at the corners of her eyes. “Besides, I could never allow it.”

He arches his brow. “Oh?”

Cerci shakes her head, pigtails bouncing ridiculously. “It would make my mother far too happy.”

That almost gets a laugh out of Regulus. “Yeah, mine too.”

Cerci meets his eye, something mischievous in her gaze. “Well that settles it then, we can’t ever date.”

“No, I suppose not.”

She holds out her hand and it takes Regulus a second to realize she wants to shake on it, like it’s some sort of business deal. He indulges her.

“To never making our mothers happy.”

That actually does get a laugh out of him, surprising given how miserable he'd been not five minutes earlier. "To never making our mothers happy," he agrees, their hands fall away only for Cerci to link their arms.

"Now," she says as they start walking again. "Why don't you tell me about this terrible day of yours?"

It's not that she isn't a menace, because she is. But strangely, Regulus has found over the past few weeks that he rather likes talking to Cerci Greengrass—as ridiculous as she is. There is something mildly awe inspiring about someone who says absolutely everything they're thinking or feeling without a moments hesitation. Regulus has never met anyone quite like her.

So he tells her about this morning, with Barty, and about James too—just leaving out his name and...other details. A fight, he tells her, with a friend. It might be his fault.

"So apologize," she shrugs, causing Regulus to roll his eyes.

"Yes, of course, why didn't I think of that," he says dryly. But when she looks over at him she is completely earnest.

"Why didn't you?"

"Because it's complicated."

"Complicated how?"

"It just...he was being an idiot."

Cerci smirks. "It sounds like you just don't want to have to admit you were in the wrong."

"I just admitted it to you didn't I? Besides, like I said, he was being an idiot, so I was only partially in the wrong—fifty percent in the wrong at most."

She sends him a pointed look. "Uh-huh."

Regulus lets out a heavy sigh, rubbing at his face. "Apologizing doesn't...come...easy to me," he says stiffly.

"I never would have guessed that about you," she says with a smile, and as if that wasn't annoying enough she continues; "Do you always just give up on things that don't come easy to you?"

Regulus scowls. "No."

"Well then, apologize."

Regulus grumbles. He could, he supposes, apologize. Though he's not entirely sure he should have to. I mean, yes, he was a bit of an ass. But how many times is he going to have to explain to James that they can't be "a couple"? Can't be out? Not just for now, not just temporarily. But ever.

"Oh," Cerci stumbles to a stop, pulling Regulus up short beside her.

"What is it?" he asks, looking around at the empty corridor.

"I think we may have found students breaking curfew," she says, her cheeks pinking as she holds back a smirk.

Regulus opens his mouth to ask her what she's on about when he hears it—a stifled moan. He turns to stare at the broom cupboard next to them in horror.

"They couldn't have used a bloody silencing charm?" he grumbles under his breath.

Cerci chokes back a laugh. "What do we do?" she whispers.

"We could keep walking?"

"Pretty sure our whole job is to deal with stuff like this."

Regulus rolls his eyes. "What are we even getting them for? Breaking curfew?"

"Inappropriate behaviour?"

"Indecent exposure?"

Cerci snorts. "Technically, you don't know that they're indecent."

At that moment another noise slips under the door—this one closer to a growl.

He sends Cerci a pointed look. "Sounds pretty bloody indecent."

"Fair enough. I can do it if you want?"

He waves her off, pulling out his wand and staring at the door, already feeling exhausted. He's beginning to think that Dumbledore gave him this Prefect pin as some sick punishment.

"Alohomora," he flicks his wrist, perhaps with a bit too much force because the door not only unlocks but bursts open, banging into the wall. Regulus looks very pointedly away, not wanting to see any half-undressed strangers.

He's about to speak when one of the occupants beats him to it; "Holy fuck."

Something cold drips down his spine.

Of course.

Of course it's him.

Regulus looks up, entirely ready to give his brother a snarky lecture about being a slag but all words die in his mouth when he sees Sirius with his shirt half open, hair a mess, leaning against the wall with one hand by Remus Lupin's head. He blinks, trying to make the image reform in his mind's eye, trying to figure out how he's seeing what he's seeing.

"You know what?" Cerci says, after a moment of stillness in which no one seems willing to move—to address the situation. "I think they get the idea. We can just go now, you guys get back to your dorm, have a good night."

She reaches out, tugging on Regulus's sleeve, trying to pull him away, but he doesn't move.

He knows he should probably feel happy—or, if not happy, relieved. All those years spent worrying about how Sirius would react to finding out about him and he was the same way all along.

But that isn't how he feels.

He feels angry.

This, he realizes, is why James thinks he can talk to Sirius. This is why he thinks that they can be out in the open, at least to some people. No doubt Sirius and Lupin are. James looks at them and sees a future. A future he and Regulus can never have. The injustice of it—that after everything, Sirius gets this too. The only thing Regulus has ever wanted.

It makes him want to break something.

"Regulus—" Cerci tries again.

"This is priceless this is," Regulus says coldly, his voice waking the couple up. Sirius quickly pulls away from Lupin, doing-up his shirt, eyes wide with panic. Good, Regulus thinks.

"Really, never would have guessed it, Sirius Black, teen heartthrob, gay."

"I'm not gay," Sirius snaps back, and Regulus doesn't miss the way that Lupin flinches.

"Really? And what exactly is your heterosexual explanation for being locked in a cupboard, half dressed, with another bloke?"

The fire is still bright in Sirius's eyes but his cheeks are pinking.

Regulus laughs coldly. "And after all the shit you've talked over the years," when he speaks next he's doing a mocking impression of Sirius's voice. "Oh come on Reg, don't be such a fairy, don't be so fucking queer, only bent boys cry," he drops the voice, expression flat, staring pointedly at his brother who looks about ready to crawl out of his skin.

"I was a kid," Sirius says through clenched teeth.

"Oh well, in that case I guess you're only sort of a hypocrite."

"Okay," Lupin finally steps forward, "we're going now."

“Yeah,” Cerci jumps in, “we have to finish rounds so...”

Both Cerci and Remus start tugging on their respective Black brothers, Remus somewhat more effectively, guiding Sirius down the hall towards Gryffindor Tower. But Regulus isn't ready to let this go yet.

“Detention,” he says, bringing the other pair to a stop only a few paces away. “For inappropriate behaviour.”

Sirius looks back at him, face pale. “You can't do that. People will talk.”

“About what Sirius Black and Remus Lupin were doing alone in a cupboard together after curfew? I should certainly hope so. You know how gossip travels at this school. And I'll be happy to supply any details people might be after.”

Sirius looks like he can't decide between anger and horror. “You can't do that Reg.”

He smiles coldly. “Watch me.”

Sirius makes a move, like he's trying to lunge at him, but Lupin pulls him back, stepping between the pair of them. He meets Regulus's gaze head on.

“We both know you're not going to do that,” he says calmly.

But Regulus doesn't back down.

“Your confidence is unfounded.”

“Is it?” And when Regulus doesn't flinch he pushes; “We all have things we'd rather not get out.”

Regulus doesn't need a mirror to know that the leer cutting its way across his face isn't pleasant.

“What are you talking about Moony?” Sirius asks.

“Yes Lupin, do go on. Tell him. What are you talking about?”

The two of them stare at one another, unblinking, a face off. A duel without wands. Waiting to see whose nerve cracks first. Lupin may not care about outing Regulus, but he won't do that to James. Regulus would bet his life on it.

Eventually Lupin breaks, shaking his head as he turns back to Sirius. “Come on, lets go.”

But Sirius isn't going anywhere, not while this still hangs in the air.

“Reg, I need you to do this for me okay? I need you not to tell anyone.”

Those words are like broken glass, shredding Regulus on the inside. When was the last time you gave a shit about me? He wants to say. About what I need? When was the last time you

did anything but look down your nose at me?

“No.”

He sees the fear explode across Sirius's face. “Regulus please. Fuck—please, I’m begging you here. As your brother.”

Regulus laughs. “As my brother? You haven’t been my brother in six fucking years Sirius, so do us all a favour and spare us your grovelling. It’s pathetic, even for you.”

Sirius opens and closes his mouth like a fish, no words making it out. Remus reaches out again, trying to pull Sirius away. “He won’t do it, he’s bluffing, c’mon.”

But Sirius is staring right into Regulus’s eyes, into his steadfast gaze.

“What do you want Reg?” he asks finally.

And oh.

There are so many things.

But the answer comes quickly enough, as though he’d had it planned.

“Come home for Christmas.”

Sirius goes so still it’s startling, the blood draining from his face.

“No,” this is Remus now, stepping forward again. “There is no fucking way.”

Regulus shrugs. “Fine, then I suppose congratulations are in order. Hogwarts first openly gay couple. What an honour.”

Something strangled comes out of Sirius’s throat. “They’ll kill me Reg, you realize that? They’ll kill me if I go back?”

“No, they won’t,” and they won’t. They just won’t let him go. But why should he get to? To walk away? Let him see how it feels to be stuck in a house with no air. Let him see how much harsher they’ve become. How much tighter their hands squeeze.

“I’ll give you time to think about it,” he says, when the boys in front of him continue to stand in horrified silence. “Though if I were you I wouldn’t keep me waiting too long,” he looks over his shoulder at Cerci. “C’mon, lets go.”

He starts walking towards her but Lupin reaches out and grabs his wrist. Regulus isn’t sure he’s ever seen so much rage contained in one person before. It’s impressive, really.

“He’ll never forgive you for this, you know that?” he’s dropped his voice low, and there is no doubt who the “he” in question is.

Regulus feels his chest squeeze but ignores it. “Isn’t that what you want?” he asks, before ripping his arm out of Lupin’s grasp and pushing down the hallway.

Regulus doesn’t sleep well, bouncing between regret and satisfaction. For once maybe Sirius will understand how it feels—how it really feels—to be in Regulus’s position. To have someone else holding your life in their hands and not being able to fight your way out. Or to run away, which has always worked so well for Sirius in the past. What was it Sirius had said to him? Better to be dead than to let them have you? Well, they’d see how much of that Gryffindor valour he really had, the smug bastard.

“You alright there Reg?”

Regulus blinks, swerving just in time to avoid running into the open door in front of him.

“You seem a little...distracted,” Evan goes on, clearly trying to hold back a laugh.

“M’fine,” he mutters, adjusting his transfiguration books as they head in the direction of their next class.

He’s not really paying attention when he hears Barty mutter “Mudblood” at someone they pass in the hall. It’s not an uncommon occurrence, the people around them barely batting an eye. That is, until a strong voice cuts through the buzzing chatter.

“Sorry, I didn’t catch that. What did you just say to me?”

Regulus blinks, looking from Evan to Barty as they all come to a stop, Mary Macdonald standing in the centre of the hallway with her hands on her hips and a storm in her eyes.

Barty shifts uncomfortably. No one’s ever called him out before.

“You heard what I said,” he mutters, checking nervously about for teachers.

She smiles at him. “Really? Because I heard “I have a small dick” which, I have to admit, is a weird thing to whisper in a girl’s ear, but hey, whatever gets you off I suppose.”

There’s a ripple of snickering in the crowd around them that causes Barty’s face to go beet red.

“Watch yourself Macdonald,” he growls, and Regulus finds himself inching closer in case he has to stop Barty from doing something stupid like cursing Mary Macdonald in the middle of a busy hallway.

She laughs, stepping forward until the two of them stand toe to toe, it feels like she looms over him even though he’s a good two to three inches taller than her. “Does it make you feel strong, spewing rubbish like that?” she asks, her words cutting. “Because personally, I think it’s pathetic,” Barty opens his mouth to retaliate but she doesn’t let him. “Don’t you ever threaten me again Barty Crouch, you haven’t even a quarter of the power that I have.”

With that she turns on her heel, Regulus spotting a concerned looking McKinnon waiting for her at the other end of the corridor. Despite Regulus's fears Barty doesn't move—doesn't reach for his wand or lunge after her. In fact, he stands frighteningly still, the hallway traffic slowly starting to make its way around him again, most people giving him a wide birth, afraid of getting hit with whatever temper tantrum is coming.

"I mean," Evan says after a few moments of silence, Macdonald now well out of sight, "that was kind of hot."

Regulus turns to look at him, brow arched and Evan instantly throws his hands up.

"Listen, she's a grade-A bitch, I'm not saying she isn't, but, you know, a hot one."

Regulus just shakes his head, not wanting to touch that, happy that Barty still doesn't appear to be paying them much attention, his dark eyes burning a whole into the floor where Macdonald had been standing.

"Disgraceful isn't it?"

Comes a snide voice from behind them.

They turn to find Snape leaning against the wall, Mulciber looming like a bodyguard beside him.

"Oh piss off Severus," Evan says with the wave of his hand.

"No I mean it," he goes on, eyeing Barty's still turned back. "The way they're allowed to just strut about, to treat us."

"Listen, Sevy, I know the girls are none too keen on you, but you really shouldn't go making generalizations. Some of us do quite well with the ladies," Evan gives him a wink that has Snape rolling his eyes.

"He means Mudbloods idiot," Mulciber grumbles in his baritone voice.

Evan looks over at him and frowns. "Pot, kettle, no?"

"Did he just call me an idiot?!"

Evan gives Regulus a little nudge. "I love it when people prove my points for me."

"Listen you little—" Mulciber steps forward but Snape holds out his arm, blocking his path before he can get too close.

"There's no point fighting amongst ourselves," Snape says, causing Regulus to arch his brow.

"You say that like we're on the same side."

Severus gives him something that is maybe meant to be a smile but doesn't seem to have much good will in it. "Aren't we?" And then; "We need to do something, need to put them in

their places.”

“That’s what I’ve been saying,” Barty speaks for the first time, finally turning to look at them.

Snape’s eyes go bright, like a predator who’s just caught his prey. “Excellent,” Snape licks his lips. “I’ve been thinking—“

But Regulus doesn’t hear what Snape has been thinking. Partially because he hates the kid and therefore tunes him out whenever possible. But also because, at that moment, he spots James across the hall, gaze intent on him. It’s hard to hold, all the anger in that look. The betrayal. Hard not to sink under it. James hasn’t looked at him like that in a long time. Maybe not ever. For a second Regulus wonders if James is going to confront him here and now. It would be so like him. But after a few seconds he turns away, called by someone else. He doesn’t look back again.

“Oi, Reg,” he feels someone knock his shoulder and looks up to find Evan staring down at him. “We gotta go, Transfiguration remember?”

Regulus blinks, Snape and Mulciber are already walking down the hall, Barty at their side. An unholy alliance if Regulus has ever seen one.

“Right,” he says eventually, “yeah, lets go.”

Evan gives him a curious look. “You sure you’re alright?”

Regulus swallows with difficulty, looking at the spot where James had been.

“Of course.”

As he walks through the door to the Come and Go Room the fire comes to life, candles lighting around the room, filling the space with a warmth that feels strange after coming from the green of the Slytherin dorms. This space is so familiar to him now. It feels like home.

The room is empty of course, he’s always the first one, James coming after he spies him on his map. Which means that Regulus now has nothing to do but wait. Normally he doesn’t mind, but tonight his nerves are fried.

He perches himself on the end of the bed, hands on his knees, trying to prepare himself. He focuses on his breath, on keeping it even, on staying calm. He can do this. He can. He can. He can.

James doesn’t keep him waiting long. It can’t be more than fifteen minutes before the door is opening again and James is walking in. The minute he sees Regulus he stops, eyes hard in a way Regulus has never seen before.

Regulus clears his throat. “You’ve heard then?”

“Yes.”

He nods, waiting for James to go on but he doesn't. Regulus knows, of course, what he ought to do. Apologize, just like Cerci said. More than that, beg for forgiveness. Explain how infuriating it had been to realize that Sirius was once again getting everything he wanted.

But, of course, he doesn't do any of that.

“I suppose it must have felt nostalgic, the four of you sitting around bashing me. Any new insults I should know about?” he says flippantly, looking up to find James with his hands in fists. Most people express themselves with their faces or their words, but James, James is all hands. The way they move and reach and hold. You can learn everything you need to know about him just by watching his hands.

“I defended you actually,” his voice is so cold that it takes Regulus a moment to realize what he's actually said, and even then he still needs to run the sentence over a few more times before it sinks in.

“Defended me?” he repeats, feeling suddenly wrong footed. He wasn't expecting that.

James nods stiffly. “I told Remus I thought you were afraid of going back to Grimmauld alone,” Regulus struggles between feeling insulted and at the same time feeling terribly, tragically seen. But James doesn't give him the chance to interrupt. “I said I doubted Sirius had just been an innocent bystander, that I was sure he'd goaded you into it,” Regulus feels his chest grow tight at the idea of James standing up for him. “Remus hasn't spoken to me all day so that's been lovely. Tell me, Reg, what the fuck is wrong with you?”

He's not fast enough to stop himself from grimacing. “Well,” he says slowly, “that's a bit of a loaded question.”

James stares back at him, blank faced. “Yeah, I'm not joking right now.”

No.

He certainly isn't.

Regulus can't think of anything to say, so they end up just standing there staring at one another. Eventually James speaks again.

“Remus says you won't tell anyone, because you know I won't forgive you if you do. But it won't matter because Sirius doesn't know that, so he'll still do what you want. That you're playing us both,” James's fists are still clenched at his sides. “I told him that you aren't that manipulative,” he lets out a shaking exhale. “Was I wrong?”

Regulus blinks. “What?”

“Was. I. Wrong?”

He isn't sure how to answer that question. He drops his eyes, thinking about it, trying to pick the truth out of his mess of intentions.

“I don’t intend to tell anyone,” he says finally. “Too much drama for too little reward. But I was counting on Sirius not knowing that. You I—you I just tried not to think about.”

James stares at him for a moment longer before shaking his head, turning around so that his back is to Regulus, hands at the base of his neck.

“That’s fucked up Reg, you do realize that?”

And for some reason that sparks something in him. “It’s all fucked up.”

“That’s a copout Regulus.”

“No,” he says stubbornly. “It’s the truth. It’s all fucked up. It’s fucked up that Sirius gets to do whatever he wants and get away with it.”

James laughs without humour. “What are you even talking about?”

Regulus’s nails are digging into his knees, the anger like a fuse, already lit and headed towards detonation. “What did he do last year James?”

That gets James to turn around again. “What has that got to do with—“

“—because he’ll do it again. Whatever the fuck it is that he did to hurt Lupin so badly? He’ll do it again. And you’ll all forgive him. You’ll let it slide—“

“I didn’t let anything slide!”

“Bullshit!” Regulus is standing now, facing James. “You and Lupin and everyone else, you let him get away with using you. With taking what he wants and giving nothing back and I’m sick of it. I’m sick of him getting everything.”

James’s mouth forms a firm line, eyes unmoved. “So what? You’re the one who’s gonna punish him then, is that it? The one who’s gonna put him in his place?”

“Well no one else is going to do it, clearly.”

“You’re acting like a fucking baby, you know that?”

Which is completely unfair in Regulus’s opinion. “Oh fuck you James.”

“He’s not going back to Grimmauld Place,” James says harshly. Regulus usually isn’t that aware of the height difference between them. But just then he feels it, feels those extra inches James has weighing on him, pushing him down into the ground.

“Well I guess we’ll see, won’t we?”

“No,” James says harshly. “He’s not going and you’re not saying shit, understood?”

Regulus glares at him. “But why? I thought people would surprise me James? I thought there was no need to be so scared? If that’s all true then why the fuck does it matter?”

“Because he doesn’t want it!”

Regulus laughs cruelly. “Oh, and whatever Sirius wants Sirius gets, right? You make damn sure of that don’t you? Running around, cleaning up his messes.”

“Shut-up Reg.”

“Tell me, does it ever get tiring, being so far up his ass?”

“I said shut-up.”

“One of these days he’s gonna really fucking hurt someone. I mean really bad. And I can’t wait to hear what you say then—how you defend him—“

“Stop making it sound like Sirius is in the wrong,” James cuts in. “He hasn’t done anything to you.”

“HE’S DONE EVERYTHING TO ME.”

Regulus is breathing heavy, his chest heaving up and down and for the first time James looks something other than angry.

“Reg—“

“Get out.”

“Regulus—“

“I said get out! Get the fuck away from me!” But, of course, James doesn’t move, not an inch, just keeps standing there staring at him, with his too big eyes behind his too big glasses seeing all of him. Seeing far too much of him.

“What are you even doing here?” he goes on, pushing, pushing, pushing. “Don’t you have a Mudblood to fuck?” Evans has been drooling over him for weeks, driving Regulus up the wall every time she sits next to him. “I’m sure your blood traitor parents will be so proud when they find out. The Potter line turned to filth.”

James goes stiff, staring at Regulus like he doesn’t recognize him. And then, without a word, he turns on his heel and walks out of the room. The sound of the door slamming behind him echoing in Regulus’s chest.

And that’s okay.

It’s fine.

Good, even.

James should walk away.

That’s what Regulus wants.

What he's wanted for months.

He starts pacing, struggling to get enough air, feeling as though his lungs won't expand. His ribcage suddenly shrunk to half the size.

But it's fine.

Good, even.

Inhale.

Exhale.

Nothing matters.

Especially not James Potter.

Somehow he ends up on the other side of the room, gripping the fireplace mantel with both hands. This feeling will pass, he's sure of it. He's been through worse than this. If there is anything Regulus is an expert in it's pain. And it always passes. Always.

Besides, this is fine.

Good, even.

Now he and James can go their separate ways. James can live his happy perfect life and Regulus can...can persist. And James need never know about the Mark. Probably for the best. It would only hurt him.

Regulus is still clutching at the fireplace, unable to take in a full breath, unable to quell the aching pain beneath his ribs, his lungs, his heart. He squeezes his eyes shut, trying to stop the world from spinning.

You are my happy.

He hadn't meant to say it.

But he had meant it.

That was okay though.

Good, even.

Because happy was never something he was meant to have anyway.

He almost thinks he's imagining it when he hears the door open. His head snapping up as he turns around and sees James Potter walking back into the room. James stutters under Regulus's gaze, like maybe he's going to change his mind and walk right back out. But eventually he comes forward, sitting on the arm of one of the sofas facing the fireplace. He runs a hand over his face, looking exhausted.

Regulus doesn't know what to say.

"Thing is," James speaks eventually, looking down at the hands in his lap. He isn't shouting anymore, he doesn't even sound angry, "sometimes I need to walk away, I always have. Even when I was little. I need space. I need to think."

Regulus stares at him. "To think?" he repeats, fairly certain that any minute he's going to blink and realize that this is all a hallucination.

James nods, "Yeah," and then, looking up; "but I'm always coming back."

Those eyes say,

I know you.

Say,

I heard you giving up even if you never opened your mouth.

James exhales, never looking away from Regulus, "I'll always come back to you, okay?"

Suddenly Regulus has a visceral image of the day Sirius left. Of the empty bedroom. The missing chair at the table. His mother, in one of her rages, burning his face off the family tree. And the weeks of waiting. For anything. An owl, a floo call, a Muggle letter. But nothing ever came. The next time he saw Sirius was on the Hogwarts Express. His brother had barely looked at him. Barely talked to him since.

Regulus wants to tell James that people don't come back. They certainly don't come back for him. And maybe there's a good reason for that. After all, you don't drown yourself trying to save a dead body.

Regulus sighs, leaning against the fireplace and scrubbing at his face. "You shouldn't."

"Shouldn't?"

"Come back to me."

James doesn't seem surprised by this. "Do you not want me here?" he asks calmly. Impressively calm, considering a few minutes ago they were screaming at one another.

Regulus almost laughs. "You know I do."

James arches his brow and it takes a valiant effort on Regulus's part not to roll his eyes.

"I want you here," he says. And then; "I shouldn't though. I wish I didn't."

James sits with that for a minute, eyes softening ever so slightly. "I know."

Part of Regulus wants to tell James to go, to build on this space between them, to stretch it and pull it until they can't reach one another anymore. Until it becomes insurmountable. But

the other part of him—the stronger, needier part—wants to walk over there and bury his face in James’s chest, wants to feel his arms wrap around him, wants to listen to James talk his sentimental nonsense until he falls asleep.

You are my happy.

He sighs. “What are you doing here James?”

James looks at him. “Why am I not fucking Lily Evans you mean?”

Regulus tries and fails not to wince. But he doesn’t correct him. After a few moments of tense silence James goes on. “Hoping you apologize I suppose.”

Regulus watches him. “For calling her a Mudblood?”

James nods slowly. “Among other things.”

“You really do hate that word don’t you?”

James looks at him with something nearing disappointment. “Yes,” he says, and then; “I wish you did.”

Regulus looks inside himself for the indignation that he knows James feels, but he comes up blank. Eventually he shrugs. “I don’t feel anything about that word.”

James grimaces. “I know.”

The word “sorry” sits in Regulus’s mouth, ready to be spoken, to be set free. Yet for some reason the idea of saying it makes his stomach squirm. Several moments pass before he finally clears his throat. “I’m sorry.”

The corners of James’s mouth twitch. “Thank you,” he runs a hand through his hair and when he looks back at Regulus there’s the hint of worry there. “I’m gonna need you to do something for me okay?”

Well, this doesn’t sound good.

“Okay,” Regulus says hesitantly.

“I need you to tell Sirius that you won’t out him to the school.”

Regulus grits his teeth, “Isn’t it enough that I tell you?”

James shakes his head. “No, and there’s another thing.”

Definitely doesn’t sound good.

“I need you to do it under Veritaserum.”

Regulus waits for the laughter. Because surely this is a joke. His indignation must show on his face because James throws up his hands in a placating gesture. “Listen, I had to talk

Remus down from having you make an unbreakable vow okay? This was the compromise.”

Regulus continues to stare at James like he’s lost his bloody mind. Which he must have.
“This is a terrible idea.”

“You have a better one?”

Regulus grinds his teeth. He hates Veritaserum. It makes him feel too...exposed. Out of control. It’s violating. A shiver runs through him just thinking about it. Too much like Legilimency.

“Reg?” James asks cautiously, he can see the concern in his expression.

“I’ll do it,” Regulus says finally, though every part of him revolts against the idea. “But I have conditions.”

James arches his brow. “Which are?”

Regulus holds his gaze. “You’re the one who does the asking.”

There’s a short pause before James nods. “Okay. Sirius will still have to be there though, probably Remus as well, he’s the one brewing it.”

Regulus grimaces. “I can brew it.”

“Yeah, I don’t think that’s going to work for them.”

He’d assumed as much.

“Fine. But you ask. And it’s only the one question and I get to hear it before I take the potion, understood?”

Another pause. “Yeah Reg, okay,” and then; “I won’t let anything happen that you don’t want, you know that right?” Those big eyes. Infuriatingly bright. And kind. Regulus nods.

That helps. Doesn’t fix anything. But it helps.

“When?” he asks finally.

“Tomorrow?”

His stomach squirms but really, better to get this over with sooner rather than later.

You could say no, offers the voice in his head. You could make good on your threat.

The problem is, it’s hard to want to, staring at James.

Weak, the voice hisses.

Yeah, he thinks, I am.

“Is that okay?” James ducks his head, trying to get Regulus’s attention.

Regulus blinks, realizing he’s just been standing there silently.

“Fine,” he’s says flatly.

The fire crackles behind them, casting shadows over the bed across the room. It feels uncomfortable to look at right now, like it doesn’t belong here, in this moment. This is usually such a happy space.

“Are we done now?” Regulus asks stiffly, trying to keep his voice as detached as possible.

James looks up. “Done?”

“Fighting?”

James watches him for a minute before sighing, holding his hand out. After a few seconds Regulus finds himself taking it, being pulled into James, just the way he’d wanted, though he’d never admit it. He burrows his face into crux of the other boy’s neck.

“Yeah Reg,” James says softly, hand tracing circles on his back. “We’re done fighting.”

It feels good. Even if Regulus knows it isn’t true.

They don’t really talk much after that. Eventually James slides down onto the sofa, bringing Regulus with him, holding him too tight. It feels like denial. Like licking wounds they can’t heal. Still, Regulus doesn’t pull away. Not for a long time.

He’s yawning when he finally makes his way down the passage to the Slytherin common room. It’s late, close to two in the morning he imagines. He feels warn out by the day, by the cauldron of emotions bubbling in his chest. By all the things he can’t do.

Maybe if any of those things had been different he would have noticed sooner—the unnatural quiet. The familiar buzzing of a Muffliato charm. But he doesn’t. Doesn’t notice anything until he gets to the door of his dorm and finds it locked. He looks down at the handle in his hands, trying to twist it again with no luck. He briefly considers going back to the common room and just sleeping on one of the sofas. He hasn’t got the energy for whatever the hell those idiots are doing in there. But after a few minutes of deliberating he pulls out his wand.

“Alohomora,” he hisses, hearing the satisfying click of the lock. With a deep breath he slides his wand back up his sleeve and pushes forward.

The first thing that hits him is the noise. As soon as he passes the threshold some terrible wizard rock band starts shouting in his ears, the door closing behind him. The second thing he notices are the people. He blinks, adjusting to the dark lighting. Mulciber and Snape are sitting on his bed, girls Regulus doesn’t recognize dancing in front of them, the curtains around Barty’s bed have been drawn and Evan—

“REG!” Evan shouts, cup in one hand, the other slinging around Regulus’s shoulders, pulling him further into the room. Regulus can smell the alcohol on his breath.

“Evan, what the hell is going on?” He spots Avery in the corner, a girl on his lap, her back to Regulus.

“Ah, well, Severus over there,” he gestures to the miserable twat with his drink. “actually had a good idea for once.”

“I highly doubt that—is this a party? Are you throwing a party in the middle of the week in our dorm room? With Snape of all people?”

“No, no, listen,” he thumps Regulus too hard in the chest, knocking the wind out of him. “Ooh, sorry about that. But no, not a party—not just a party anyway—see, after Macdonald’s little display in the corridor Snape decided that the Mudblood girls needed to be knocked down a few pegs, you know, reminded of who’s fucking in charge around here. Who their betters are so to speak,” Evan waggles his eyebrows in a thoroughly unsettling way.

Regulus still feels lost. “You wanted to put them in their place?” he repeats, getting a nod of approval from Evan. “...So you invited them back to your room for a drink?”

Evan snorts, gripping Regulus’s shoulder. “Nah, nah, no invites,” he brings his face uncomfortably close to Regulus’s. “We don’t need to ask the Mudbloods for shit. We can just take it.”

Regulus stares at him, feeling an uncomfortable scratching against his ribs as he takes in the room again, takes in the vacant looks on the girls’ faces. “Evan,” he says slowly. “What did you do?”

Evan grins. “Imperio. Surprisingly, Barty is very good at it,” he leans back, taking a sip of his drink.

Regulus steps away, a wave of nausea crashing into him. He remembers being in the kitchen. Remembers Bellatrix’s voice in his head:

On your knees.

Bark.

Kiss it.

Vomit crawls up the back of his throat, and he collides with the wall behind him, skin covered in sweat, everything too hot.

“Hey, woah, Reg?” Evan’s voice gets closer and Regulus cringes away.

“Don’t,” he hisses, stopping Evan’s hand mid-air as he reaches for him. Regulus shakes his head. “Don’t touch me.”

Evan looks genuinely frightened. “Shit, you don’t look good. Are you okay?”

Regulus swallows, trying to figure out a way to answer that question when his eyes fall on Barty's bed again. Curtain's drawn.

"Evan, what's Barty doing?"

"What?" Evan looks over his shoulder, "Oh, uh," he turns back to Regulus, his smile slightly less confident. "He—you know—he got Mary."

He'd been thirteen.

Lucius said: you'll like it. Trust me. Don't you trust me Reggie?

And he had.

Of course he had.

He'd been thirteen.

They're everywhere. The girls with the dead eyes. And suddenly they look just like him.

"Regulus—"

"Stop it, stop this. They need to leave." His back is pressed against the wall but it's not enough, like the thick air of the room has grown hands and he can feel it. Feel them. On his skin. In his head.

"Hey, look, it's okay alright?" Evan says, hands held up like he's trying to calm a startled animal. "It's not like they'll remember it anyway."

Don't you trust me Reggie?

Regulus's nails start digging into the stone.

"They'll remember."

"What?"

Regulus forces his eyes open, not realizing he had closed them in the first place. "Evan, please. I'm asking, please. Please. Get them out."

There's a pause. A few seconds. A few minutes. Regulus doesn't know, but in the end Evan nods.

"Okay," and as easy as that he whips out his wand, spelling off the music and upping the lights, turning to face the room at large.

"Shows over folks, lets clear out, send the witches on their way."

"Are you kidding me?" Avery demands, shoving the girl off his lap so that he can look at Evan properly. The girl doesn't react, her expression remaining blank, Regulus has to look away.

“Getting cold feet Rosier?” Snape asks, though his eyes are on Regulus.

Evan just grins at him. “Getting bored more like. Now, if you don’t mind, you can get the fuck out of my room.”

“What about Crouch?” Mulciber demands, jabbing a hand towards Barty’s bed.

“What about him?” Evan asks. “You do know that he lives here right?”

Mulciber scowls. “So what? He just gets to carry on while the rest of us get blue balls?”

Evan gives him a flat look, but Regulus can tell he’s thinking about how difficult Barty is going to make this. Eventually, he turns to the bed in question.

“Barty—“

“Don’t you fucking dare Evan!” a voice growls from behind the curtains.

Evan sighs. “C’mon Barty. Get out here, it’s over.”

There’s a pause before the curtains whip back so violently Regulus is surprised they don’t come off their tracks. Barty is shirtless but his trousers are still on. That’s something, isn’t it? Regulus sags a little more into the wall.

There’s thunder in the look Barty throws at Evan. “You’re joking, tell me you’re joking? Because I swear if you don’t start laughing—“

“Now, now,” Snape interrupts, sliding off Regulus’s bed—he’ll have to get the house elves to wash the sheets—and coming to lean against the chest at the foot of it. “Don’t be too hard on poor Rosier, he’s only doing what he’s told,” Regulus makes sure to hold Snape’s gaze. “Isn’t that right Black?”

Merlin he hates him.

“Yeah, I want you the fuck out of my room.”

Snape smirks. “Alright, fair enough. But surely you won’t have a problem with your friend carrying on?”

“I have a problem with it,” Mulciber grumbles.

Snape takes another step closer to him and Regulus feels alarm bells go off inside his head. Too close. Too close. Too close. But he swallows that fear, however much it hurts going down.

“Regulus?” Barty demands.

But Regulus doesn’t take his eyes off of Snape. “Yeah, I have a problem with it.”

Snape's smile grows. "But why?" he takes another step closer and Regulus wonders if he knows what he's doing. There's something cruel in Snape's eyes. Something cold.

He has a vision of a hallway. Roger Flint crowding him into a wall. And Snape—Snape standing there. Of course this had been his idea.

"I don't have to explain myself to you. Now get out and take them with you," he motions to the blank faced girls.

"Reg what the fuck!" Barty is halfway out of his bed when a foot comes from behind and kicks him in the back, sending him catapulting onto the floor. Almost immediately a half-dressed Mary Macdonald follows, clear eyed and on a warpath. Regulus curses under his breath. This is the last thing they need.

"Don't let the bitch out!" Barty shouts, struggling to get up from the floor. Mulciber is the first one to move, throwing his huge body in her path.

"You want a kiss Macdonald," he asks as he grabs her by the arms, pinning them to her sides.

"Don't. Fucking. Touch. Me." She knees him in the groin and he instantly drops her, doubling over in pain. But Barty is on his feet now and he grabs her by the hair before she can get far, yanking her backwards with too much force. She goes careening towards the floor, Barty noticing too late that she won't be able to catch herself. A split second later Mary Macdonald's head hits the stone.

The room goes still.

They wait for her to get up.

She doesn't.

"Fuck," Barty is the first one to speak, all his bravado drained away. "Oh fuck, oh fuck, my dad's going to kill me."

Regulus spares him a glance before he looks back at Mary, her eyes closed, hair definitely darker near the scalp. He steps forward, carefully kneeling down on the ground and hovering his ear above her chest.

"She's breathing," he says eventually, sitting back.

"Fuck, that's worse," Barty starts to pace.

Evan crouches down beside him. "She's bleeding pretty bad," he says calmly. He doesn't sound upset, doesn't sound scared, simply commenting on the situation.

Regulus nods. "Yeah."

"He's going to give me the Dementors kiss," Barty is still prattling on, Barty who wanted to DO something. To prove himself so badly.

Regulus gently prods at her head, trying to get a sense of how bad the damage is while running through every healing spell he knows. There aren't many.

After a moment he pulls out his wand. "Patientiam," he tries, hearing the noise of something vaguely wet slurping into place.

Evan wrinkles his nose, "What was that?"

"Stamina spell," he mutters, turning her head gently to the side to inspect the wound. There's still a gash, bleeding less profusely now but not healed. He pulls his hands back, they're covered in blood. It's on his wand.

"So is that it? Is she good now?" Avery asks, peering over Evan's shoulder.

Regulus sends him an irritated look. "No. She needs to go to the infirmary."

That seems to garner a reaction out of everyone. Evan lets out a low whistle, Barty sits down on his bed and drops his head into his hands muttering "he's going to kill me." Mulciber and Snape decide to take a more verbal approach;

"We can't take her to the infirmary," Mulciber blusters. "They'll find us out."

"It does seem rather reckless Black," Snape adds, sounding significantly less troubled than everyone else.

Regulus glares up at him. "This whole thing was reckless." He gets to his feet. "Can you perform a memory charm?" he asks Snape.

There's a pause before the other boy nods.

"Good. Make sure they don't remember anything and then get them back to their dorms," he gestures to the girls. "And get the fuck out of my sight."

Snape's dark eyes run him up and down. "And you're in charge are you?"

He considers hexing him, but honestly, they haven't got the time. "Yeah," he pushes his sleeve back, baring his Mark for the first time since he got it. "Yeah I'm in charge."

"Holy shit," Avery says as he and Mulciber both crowd around.

He watches Snape take it in, watches him swallow his pride with a bitter look on his face, eyes flicking back up to Regulus's face.

"Well, well, who would have thought you had it in you?"

Regulus doesn't answer, just stares him down. Eventually Snape concedes. "Grab the girls," he says to his friends. "Bring them back to our room."

"Hey," Regulus stops him, Snape shooting him a look, halfway out the door. "They get back to their dorms."

Snape nods. "Of course."

None of the other girls seem to have broken free of the spell's hold, Regulus isn't sure if it's because Mary Macdonald is exceptionally strong or Barty's spell was just exceptionally weak. It could go either way. Regardless, Avery and Mulciber herd the others out without much fuss, leaving the room a silent mess.

"I'm so dead," Barty keeps repeating, looking as though he's trying to pull his hair out. "He's gonna let them suck out my soul. He's gonna watch them do it."

Regulus looks down at Mary, eyes still closed, head still bleeding.

"What's the plan captain?" Evan asks. There's really only one option at this point.

"I'll bring her to the infirmary."

Evan arches his brow in question but Regulus only shrugs. "I already have the Mark right?"

He bends down to pick her up but stops halfway. "Get me her shirt."

"What?"

Regulus looks sharply at Barty. "Get me her shirt."

Barty looks somewhere between confused and angry but he doesn't argue, reaching across his bed and coming back with a black t-shirt. Regulus is clumsy getting it on her, but he feels better once he does. Not that it changes anything.

He slips one arm under her legs and the other under her head, struggling to straighten up.

"Disillusion us would you?" he asks Evan who nods, instantly obliging. "Right, I'll see you in a bit."

"Do you want me to come with you?" Evan asks, staring somewhere over Regulus's head.

"No, it'll be easier alone." Evan nods and Regulus turns for the door, the smell of blood already overwhelming his senses.

"Regulus?"

He pauses. "Yeah?"

Barty fidgets, hair sticking out in all directions from the pulling, his face frightfully pale. "Thank you."

But Regulus doesn't respond, channeling his anger into a single look his friend will never see before pushing out the door and into the hallway beyond.

It's the middle of the night now, so the hallways are fairly easy to navigate even while carrying an unconscious body. Still, by the time he gets to the infirmary he's exhausted, breathing heavy as he lowers her carefully onto the floor, leaning her against the wall. He wipes his sweaty palms on his trousers before pulling out his wand, casting a silencing charm around them and then pointing it at Mary.

"Rennervate."

Her eyes fly open, her mouth gasping for air, arms flying out as though she expects to find herself falling.

"Sh, sh," Regulus tries to calm her. "It's okay, you're alright."

She looks like she's about to speak but instead a moan comes out of her mouth. "Ow, fuck, my head," her hand goes to grab it but instantly flies out again. "Oh my God, am I bleeding?"

"Macdon—Mary, I need you to focus okay?" he takes hold of her shoulders making sure to keep his voice even, soothing. She's shaking under his hands. "Can you focus for me?"

She blinks several times, wincing. "Regulus?"

"Yes. I need you to tell me who did this to you? Do you remember?"

"I—ow, oh ow, it hurts. Fuck, my head."

"I know," and he does, she shouldn't be conscious right now but he just needs to get through this. "Just tell me what you remember and then I can get you some pain potion okay?"

He can see her struggling through it. "Um—yeah," but her face seems to implode in on itself and she goes quiet for a long time. "Sorry," she finally manages, the word half a sob. "Sorry, it's just—"

"It's okay," Regulus says. "I just need you to tell me if you remember who did this to you?"

She breathes in with difficulty. "Um, yeah, yeah. It was—it was Crouch—it was Barty fucking Crouch."

Regulus does his best not to grimace, wand still in his hand. "Right, okay. That was really good Mary."

Her eyes squeeze shut, teeth shattering from the pain. "Can I get that potion now?"

"Yeah, of course," he lifts his wand. "I'm sorry."

"What?"

"Obliviate."

Her face goes blank. All the tension from the pain and fear dropping away. Regulus lifts his wand again.

“I really am sorry—Legilimens.”

The thing is, they’re going to ask her questions. Pomfrey. McGonagall. Dumbledore even. A student shows up to the infirmary unconscious and brutalized? This doesn’t just go away, and a blank memory is almost as dangerous as a fully intact one. So he needs to replace it. For once in his life being his mother’s son actually comes in handy. He’s seen Walburga mess with enough people’s heads—mess with his own—that he’s picked up a few tricks.

He forces his way into her head. She’s weak and doesn’t seem to know Occlumency so it isn’t hard, her memories fluttering around him, like he’s standing in a room full of butterflies, snippets of voices and faces coming in and out of focus. It’s always best to build on something real, so he focuses on her most recent memories, pulling them before him. It takes a heroic amount of mental energy to control someone else’s thoughts and he knows he won’t be able to maintain this for long. He needs to act fast.

Everything is a bit distorted because of the Imperio, the moments in the dorm room few and far between. Most of the night just black. Regulus wonders if that’s because she was slowly pushing back against the curse. If the moments of blurry memory are her coming back to the surface.

He’s Obliviated the last hour or so, meaning she has no memory of coming fully back to herself, of fighting with Barty or Mulciber. But there is the memory of her getting cursed. Regulus grabs hold of it, watching as Barty walks towards her.

Hey Macdonald?

It sounds like Regulus is listening to them under water.

Get lost creep.

Aw, come on, don’t be like that. Listen, I came to apologize.

Yeah, sure you did.

In the background Regulus—and more importantly, Mary—can see Snape, Mulciber, and Avery. He doesn’t know where Evan is but that’s all for the better. Using every ounce of control he has Regulus pauses the memory like a video recording. He surveys the faces in the background, thinking. It would be so incredibly satisfying to frame Snape. But he’s too clever, he’d figure out what was happening, find a way out, hell, maybe even find a way to turn it around on Regulus. No. He needs someone stupid enough not to realize what’s happening until it’s too late. Or even better, someone stupid enough to want to take credit for this.

Like wading through water he pushes through Mary’s memory, grabbing hold of Mulciber and moving him into Barty’s spot, covering the first boy completely. Dispersing him like smoke. The image before Regulus flickers but he holds it tight, refusing to let go of the reins.

Hey Macdonald?

Mulciber walks towards her.

Get lost creep.

Aw, come on, don't be like that. Listen, I came to apologize.

Regulus watches the whole thing play out again. Watches Mulciber move further and further into Mary's space. Watches him pull out his wand, watches him Imperio her. Watches Mary's memory shake and blur and fade to black. The voice isn't quite right, still a bit too high for Mulciber, but there's nothing he can do about that, he hasn't the time or the skill to fix it.

Taking a deep breath he pulls back, catching himself on his hands and knees as the corridor reforms around him. He blinks the spots out of his vision, breathing heavy as he turns to find Mary slumped against the wall, eyes closed again. He checks her pulse just to be certain she's still okay, and then gets to his feet.

The world spins for a moment and he worries that he's going to pass out, but somehow he manages to keep hold of his consciousness. After a few more seconds he turns his wand on himself and casts a new Disillusionment charm, the old one having faded. Then he knocks on the infirmary door and starts walking.

He's nearly at the end of the hall when he hears the door open.

"This better be important if—oh, oh sweetheart, what's happened to you?"

Regulus doesn't stop. Doesn't turn around. Even as the horror in Pomfrey's voice trembles through him. The blood on his hands suddenly burning hot.

He wonders if he'll ever get the stains out.

Chapter End Notes

Hello beautiful people!

Yeesh, like I know there are some intense chapters in this fic but this one felt particularly intense, maybe that's just me though...

I feel like Mary's attack is one of those things that is sometimes treated casually but tbh the idea of going to school with wizard Nazi's sounds terrifying so I wanted to kind of show how magic makes the situation more dangerous but hopefully it wasn't too much

THANK YOU FOR READING AND COMMENTING ect. ect. Hope you're all having a great day/night/whatever time it is where you are!

****Hi, hello, it is Soph from the future. I was asked on my tumblr why I chose to involve Reg in Mary's attack and a few people thought it would be helpful if I posted the answer here so I'm going to do that below for those of you who are interested in reading it (it's kind of long so I apologize):**

I think there's this thing that happens in fanfics or fandom or honestly in the HP books (where Snape is concerned) of having characters who are Death Eaters who never do anything wrong except becoming a Death Eater (does that make sense?) Like they're portrayed as joining the club but never participating in any of the group activities and therefore we're allowed to like them. And I think that's a problem, because it sets up this narrative that you can be, y'know, a Nazi, or a white supremacist, or whatever real life group you wanna use in this metaphor, and still be a fundamentally moral person and I disagree with that.

If you are in anyway supporting and standing with this group you are morally compromised. And so I wanted to make clear that Regulus is not someone who does the right thing all the time (or who even knows what the right thing is) or who holds the right views or a healthy outlook on life. Because if those things are true than this story goes very differently. Then he never becomes a Death Eater, then he is essentially Sirius.

It was also a way of holding the audience accountable, like we're out here rooting for this kid (and I think there are lots of reasons to root for Regulus I really do) but this kid becomes a Death Eater and you don't get to act like that doesn't mean something. This fic was meant to flesh Regulus out, to give him depth, but part of that includes him being a character you cannot love unproblematically.

I really wanted to avoid skipping over the Death Eater thing which, again, I think happens a lot in this fandom. I love a morally grey character. I love an arc. I love that Regulus switches sides at the end. But that doesn't mean there isn't still ugly stuff and that ugly stuff is not going to be forgivable to some people and that ugly stuff should make you feel uncomfortable. Even if ultimately I would like people to root for Regulus, it should be difficult. Because being a Death Eater is not insignificant and it should never be considered so, and you cannot become one and not have that effect the decisions that you make and the way you treat people.

It would have been too easy to have Regulus handle that situation perfectly and be like "look, he might be a Death Eater but he's a good Death Eater" like there's no such thing. And when you start to act like there is you are romanticizing bigotry, which is something I think Jegulus gets accused of a lot and something that I wanted to confront head on and not shy away from.

Ok, I hope that makes sense. I also don't know that I actually managed to do any of the things I wanted to by approaching the story this way, but this is what I was trying for anyway!

Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

tw/cw: Sexual content (I wanna say that this is like YA level sexual content, I could be wrong but I feel like that's accurate)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

PART I: LILY

The friendship of Lily Evans and Mary Macdonald began under a bed. Lily's bed, to be exact. See, she'd been having a bad day. It was first year and everything was just...a little...much. She missed her mum and dad, back then she even missed Petunia, and Severus was there but he wasn't there-there. He was in Slytherin. After the sorting Lily had briefly considered begging the hat to put her in Slytherin too. Especially after being placed in the same house as Black and Potter. There hadn't been any posh kids at her old school but they were about as obnoxious and self-obsessed as she had expected. And Potter was so gaga for Gryffindor that she was certain it would be filled with people just like him.

In the end, however, Lily had not had the guts to ask anything of the sorting hat, so she had remained in Gryffindor. And mostly that had been okay—posh bespectacled prats aside. Her roommates were nice, her classes were fun, and she did rather like not living in a dungeon. But she was also...lonely. And out of place. And uncomfortable. There were so many things that the kids around her—even if they weren't Purebloods—seemed to know, and it felt impossible trying to keep up with it all. Severus did his best to help her along but she could tell that he was sometimes a little bit embarrassed by her. That was the worst feeling honestly.

One afternoon, at the end of September, for no reason in particular, it had all just felt too much. So she'd crawled under her bed, trying to make the world smaller. Easier to manage. About fifteen minutes into her pity party Mary had walked in. Lily watched her feet, listened to the David Bowie song she hummed under her breath. Her and Mary had barely exchanged more than a few sentences but she was secretly Lily's favourite roommate, if only because she was the one who reminded Lily the most of home. The posters she hung on the walls were all of people Lily recognized and they didn't move or talk, plus, sometimes she would complain about things that Lily could relate to—like missing ballpoint pens and three-ringed binders.

She's not sure, to this day, what compelled her to speak then. Surely the smart thing to do would have been to remain silent and hope that her new roommate wouldn't notice her having a complete and utter mental breakdown. But being quiet had never been Lily's strong suit.

“Do you have records?” she wondered out loud.

“Ah!” Mary shouted, her feet stumbling back into her bed. “Jesus Christ, Lily? Is that you?”

“It’s just that I’ve never seen you play any but you hum them all the time,” she said in lieu of an answer.

“Where the hell are you?” Mary demanded.

“At home I have a bunch of records but my mum wouldn’t let me bring them, she didn’t know how safe it would be here and she was worried they’d get stolen, not that Wizards are dying for Muggle music but, of course, she didn’t know that. Still doesn’t know, I suppose —“

“Lily,” Mary said harshly. “Did you get turned invisible or something?”

“What? Oh,” Lily blinked. “No, I’m not invisible.”

“Then why the hell can I hear you prattling on but there’s not a single freckle in my line of vision?”

Lily scowled up at the bottom of her bed. “I don’t have that many freckles.”

“Uh-huh and the Giant Squid doesn’t have that many legs.”

“Did you just—“

“Where are you?” she was beginning to sound genuinely exasperated, but to be honest, Lily quite liked being a disembodied voice. It was freeing

“I’m under here,” she said eventually, and with great reluctance.

“Under—oh honestly,” some shuffling later Mary was kneeling on the floor and peering at Lily under the bed.

What the hell are you doing, is what Lily expected her to say. If it had been Petunia “freak” might even have been thrown in there somewhere. But the thing about Mary—the beautiful, fantastic, brilliant thing about Mary—was that she never did what you were expecting.

“I see,” is what she actually said, before sliding under the bed to lie right alongside Lily.

“What’s happened then? You and your boyfriend have a fight?”

“Boyfriend?” Lily repeated confused, and then; “Oh—OH—no. Sev isn’t—we aren’t—we’re just friends.” Though her face blushed so furiously it burned.

Mary turned her head to look at Lily, brow arched. “Really? Then you two might want to stop making googly-eyes at one another all the time.”

“We don’t do that!” Lily said almost desperately.

“You do.”

“Don’t.”

“Do.”

“Don’t.”

“Do.”

“Don’t infinity.”

Mary rolled her eyes. “Whatever. So if that’s not why you’re under here, what is?”

Lily chewed on her lip, looking back up at the bottom of her bed. “I just think...I don’t know...that someone made a mistake.”

“Probably, but you’ll have to be more specific.”

At eleven Mary’s dry sense of humour was largely lost on Lily. Mary would later credit her wit to her childhood obsession with Monty Python.

“I just don’t think I’m supposed to be a witch.”

Lily didn’t have to turn her head to know that Mary was staring at her. “What do you mean “supposed to be” ? You ARE a witch?”

Lily let out a frustrated noise. “But I’m not really though, am I? I’m a Muggle.”

“That is literally not true.”

“Yes, but I know Muggle things and I like Muggle things and I don’t know anything about Wizards really. People like Marlene or Alice or, God, even James bloody Potter, those people are meant to be Wizards and Witches. It’s in their blood. It comes to them so naturally. None of this is natural to me.”

Mary continued to stare at her for long enough that Lily started to squirm. She had rather been hoping that out of everyone Mary would understand.

“Did you know that the Gryffindor Quidditch team is almost always Half-Bloods and Purebloods?” the other girl said suddenly.

Lily blinked, adjusting to this change in topic. “I—no, no I didn’t.”

Mary nodded. “And even when there are Muggle-borns they’re always seventh years, because it takes them that long to pick up the game,” her voice was determined. “Not me though, I’m gonna get it in three. I’m going to be the youngest Muggle-born Quidditch player ever on the Gryffindor team and you know why?”

Lily shook her head and Mary inched a little closer. “To piss them the fuck off.”

At that time swearing was still rather new to Lily so she actually gasped, and after several moments of shocked silence managed to stammer; “Them?”

Mary waved her hands above her as much as the bed would allow. “The powers that be, the system, the Man. The snooty Purebloods. Because I am every bit as much a Witch as they are,” her eyes locked onto Lily’s, “and so are you.”

After that they’d gone to the Great Hall and only eaten dessert for dinner and eventually Marlene had joined them and Lily had felt better and by Christmas she didn’t want to leave. But that moment under the bed, the moment her and Mary really became friends, had always stuck with her. Always made her smile a little. Made her feel better when someone in her class laughed at some bit of magic she didn’t know—something that was obvious—that little kids learned. I am every bit as much a Witch as you are, she’d think, channeling Mary as best she could. Because Mary never apologized for herself. Never felt embarrassed. Never backed down from a fight. She was unstoppable.

The bruises take time to show up. When they do Lily waves them away with the flick of her wand. They’re blue and yellow, on Mary’s wrists, her neck, her jaw. They look like flower petals. Like fingerprints.

Mary hasn’t opened her eyes yet, at least not since Marlene and Lily have been here. Apparently she talked to McGonagall and Dumbledore, but they hadn’t been allowed in then. By the time they had Mary’d been given a sleeping potion. That was a few hours ago.

Marlene is sitting in the chair next to her, she hasn’t spoken all day, her eyes intent on Mary’s face. Pomfrey wouldn’t tell them what happened but she would tell them that Mary’s had a blow to the back of the head, a bad one. She’ll have a concussion but there are potions for that, anymore severe brain damage and they’ll have to send her to St Mungos but it’s hard to tell at this point if that’ll happen because she hasn’t been awake long enough to know. Despite all of those horrible details, it’s still the bruises that Lily can’t stop thinking about. Someone did this. They did it on purpose. They did it with their bare hands.

“Who though?” Marlene croaks beside her, causing Lily to jump. Apparently she’d said that last bit out loud.

She looks over at Marlene and after a second she shrugs. “It’d have to be Slytherin, older years. My guess is the boys, none of the girls could take her in a fight.” Could leave their fingerprints embedded in her skin.

Marlene’s face scrunches, eyes still on Mary. “But why?”

That question takes Lily by surprise. A reminder of the difference between Marlene’s life and her own. And Mary’s. “Because she’s a Mudblood.”

Marlene’s eyes go wide. “You think this was about blood status?”

Of course, she wants to say, obviously. Except it's clear that this is not the obvious conclusion for Marlene.

"They've been getting bolder," Lily tries to explain. "Shouting at us in the halls, jinxing us, and Mary's..." not likely to walk away from a fight.

"Fuck," Marlene drops her head into her hands, staying like that for a few minutes before she speaks again. "Do the teachers know?"

That is a question Lily asks herself frequently. "They know, but sometimes I think they don't quite...believe us. Or they think it's as simple as house rivalries." Her eyes trail back to Mary. "Maybe they'll take us more seriously now."

Marlene lets out a pained noise. "I didn't realize," she drops her hands, looking up. "I knew they were jerks sometimes but I didn't realize it had gotten this bad."

To be fair to Marlene, Lily isn't entirely sure she realized it had gotten this bad either. She certainly hadn't considered the possibility of one of them being attacked like this—at Hogwarts. It crossed a line somehow. Kids were cruel. They name called and teased, Lily was no stranger to it—heck, she got it for her hair back home. For a while Mudblood hadn't felt that much different. But this?

Mary starts to stir, grumbling as she turns her head from one side to the other. Instantly Marlene and Lily are on their feet.

"Mary?" Marlene says quietly. Desperately. She takes her friend's hand and squeezes.

It's odd to see Mary like this—small. There's something about her that fills up every room, she's colourful and loud and abrasive and a pain in the ass. But never small. Never fragile. Not until now.

Mary's eyes blink open, bloodshot and momentarily terrified. She jolts upright and then instantly grabs her head.

"Jesus fuck that hurts," she hisses, her voice rough and yet somehow incredibly comforting. Apparently Marlene thinks so too because she starts frantically wiping the tears from her eyes. Lily reaches out and squeezes her arm.

After a few seconds Mary's face relaxes, hands dropping from her head as she looks at them properly. Her eyes go from Marlene, to Lily, and back again.

"Mar—"

"I'm sorry—shit I'm sorry—it's just, it just really good to hear your voice."

Marlene is so busy trying to keep the tears off her cheeks that she misses the soft look in Mary's eyes.

"Okay enough, Jesus, I'm not dead."

Marlene snuffles, but when her eyes come up they're fierce. "Don't joke about that! Not right now—not when—" you could've been, she doesn't say, but judging by the new tension that falls around them they're all thinking it anyway.

"Pfft," Mary scoffs, propping her pillow up behind her and then carefully leaning herself against it. It's clear that she's in pain. "If I'm going to die young it better be because I overdosed at an orgy or something, not because some twats Imperiused me while I wasn't looking."

"They what?" Marlene's eyes grow to about twice their normal size.

"They used an unforgivable?"

Mary's eyes travel between the pair of them. "Pomfrey didn't tell you anything?"

They shake their heads.

"She told us that you split the back of your skull open, that's about it," Lily doesn't mention the bruises.

Mary snorts, "Boy did I ever," she brings her hand back to her head. "I swear if these headaches don't quit it I'm going to start breaking things."

"Do you want me to go get Pomfrey?" Marlene asks, but Mary waves her off.

"Not yet, she'll only put me to sleep again." She pinches the bridge of her nose, taking in a deep breath. "What time is it?"

"Supper," Lily answers quickly. "Six-thirty about."

Mary nods and then winces. "The day?"

Lily and Marlene exchange a quick glance. "Thursday."

"Thursday," she repeats. And then; "You reckon Slughorn will give me a pass on that potions paper?"

Lily can't help it, she laughs. "Yeah, I think he'll probably let it slide this time."

"Sweet," Mary drops her hand again, taking in another deep breath.

"You're sure you don't want me to get Pomfrey?" Marlene asks nervously.

"I just want to not be out of my head for a few more minutes." Bit by bit Lily thinks she can see Mary growing paler. It's clear that the longer she's conscious the more she hurts.

"The boys were here by the way," Lily hears herself say.

Mary opens her eyes. "The boys?"

“James, Sirius, Remus, Pete—came as soon as they heard, sat in the hallway waiting with us, but Pomfrey would only let in two visitors.”

Mary smirks. “Nothing like a head injury to make a girl popular.”

There’s a pause, none of them quite knowing what to say. It goes on for too long before Marlene finally breaks.

“Mary,” she says softly. “What the hell happened?”

“Ah, well,” Mary smiles in a cold kind of way, sending shivers down Lily’s arms. “Isn’t that the thousand galleon question.”

“You don’t remember?” Marlene asks.

Mary shrugs, wincing again. “Bits and pieces, Pomfrey says it’ll get better with time.”

“But you know you were Imperiused?” Lily asks.

“Yeah,” her eyes flick down and she becomes suddenly very interested in smoothing out the wrinkles in her bedsheets. “I know that.”

Lily can’t quite imagine it. The idea—the concept itself—is terrifying. To have someone gain complete control of you? To have the power to make you do whatever they wanted? It makes her skin crawl.

“Do you know who?” Marlene reaches out to take her hand again, squeezing.

Mary scrunches her face. “Sometimes.”

Marlene and Lily exchange another look and when Mary doesn’t continue Lily prods her; “Sometimes?”

“Like I said, it’s all bits and pieces,” she pulls her mouth to the side, still staring down at the bed. “It gets all—stretched out. I see a face and then it disappears. Then sometimes there are bodies without faces at all. Sometimes the faces switch bodies...”

Marlene looks about as terrified as Lily feels, Mary’s words have an itching quality to them. They creep along the floor. They grab at your legs. Crawl up your spine.

“Do you know the faces?” Lily finally finds herself asking. It feels a bit like Mary isn’t... quite...there. Something distant about her eyes. It reminds Lily of the school ghosts.

“Mulciber,” she finally says, hands curling in the sheets. “It was Mulciber. At least it’s usually Mulciber,” Lily has no idea what to do with the end of that sentence, Mary is starting to get frighteningly pale.

“What the fuck,” Marlene hisses. “You told McGonagall right? Dumbledore? What are they going to do?”

“No idea,” Mary says. “Didn’t tell me.”

“What can they do?” Lily finds herself asking. “Expel him?”

Marlene scoffs. “Expel? For an unforgivable? They better be calling the fucking Ministry in.”

“Mar,” Mary croaks, her free hand coming up to massage her temple. “I appreciate the righteous indignation but maybe a little less screechy.”

Marlene’s cheeks flush. “Sorry.”

Lily is about to suggest that they really ought to get Pomfrey now, since Mary is looking ready to keel over, but Marlene cuts her off.

“Weird that it was Mulciber, when was the last time you even talked to him?”

“No idea,” Mary says.

“Was he alone?”

Lily thinks she sees Mary tense. She definitely sees Mary’s eyes flick up to meet her’s before dropping back to the bed. “I don’t know. It’s not very clear.”

But that doesn’t sit well with Lily. “Mary?” she says softly, eventually bringing her friend’s gaze back to her. And she can see it, see it right there in the white’s of her eyes. Lily feels her heart sink.

“Tell me,” she says, because she doesn’t want to have to wonder. To guess. She just wants to know. To hear it and face it.

“Avery was there I’m pretty sure,” Mary says slowly and Lily knows what’s coming, really she does, knows it by the worry on Mary’s face and the reluctant way she drags out her words. But even knowing she somehow still isn’t ready. “And Snape.”

It’s a bit like getting punched in the stomach that sentence. A bit like having your heartbroken. A bit like falling off your broom. It’s so hard to explain to people, but she really had loved him. Loved him most of her life. Loved him still. Maybe that’s one of those things that never stops. Can’t be undone. She wonders how many times someone has to let you down before you don’t get back up again?

“Excuse me,” she says tersely, shaking as she turns on her heels and starts for the door.

“Lily?” Marlene calls after her.

“Get Pomfrey,” she snaps over her shoulder. “She needs a bloody pain potion.” She doesn’t hear her response, already pushing through the door.

He’ll be in the Great Hall for dinner. Most of the school will be there in fact. Lily doesn’t really care, hands in fists at her sides as she cuts across the castle. She doesn’t have a plan.

Just a storm of rage inside her that demands an outlet. That's been growing since she first saw her friend lying broken in that bed.

The Great Hall is noisy, it always is at this time, nearly everyone is here.

"Lily!"

Someone calls out to her—Remus she thinks—she doesn't look. Eyes scanning the Slytherin table until they land on one particular black-haired head. Severus doesn't see her coming until she's practically on top of him.

"Lily—"

"Up," she snaps.

His brows draw together. "Lily what—"

"Get. Up. Now."

Still looking thoroughly confused he does as she asks, standing far too close to her. "What's happened?" he asks in a hushed voice, because, of course, he can't have anyone overhearing him being decent.

Which only infuriates her more. Because he knows. He knows what's happened. And for a moment she feels frozen with all the anger coursing through her.

"Lily," he reaches out and touches her arm, she's surprised honestly, that he would be so bold in front of his friends, "lets go somewhere okay? Lets talk?"

But she doesn't want to talk.

Childishly she shoves him hard in the chest and it's probably because he isn't expecting it that he falls back, ass slamming into the floor, barely able to catch himself on his hands. Suddenly, all that noise from earlier evaporates. The Great Hall as close to silent as Lily has ever heard it.

"Merlin—what the hell," Severus says from the ground.

"It doesn't make a difference," her voice shakes more than she'd like it to. "That's what you said, do you remember?"

He blinks up at her, eyes darting nervously to the table beside them. It feels like the whole hall is watching them now.

"No," she laughs coldly. "Of course you don't. Let me remind you. I asked you—I ASKED you—if it mattered, being Muggle-born, and you said no."

His eyes come back to her's, dark and pleading. How did we get here? How. How. How.

“Was it a lie then?” she goes on. “Or was it only later? Did you hate me always? Was any of it real?”

His face pales, and he shakes his furiously as he forgets about their audience, about his friends. “I don’t hate you,” he says desperately. “You know that. You have to know that. I told you—“

“You told me it doesn’t make a difference!” and that shuts him up, sucks the words right back down his throat.

“We’re the same, me and Mary, don’t you see that?” she goes on, shaking terribly. “Everything you think about her, that you say about her, that you do to her—“ her voice cracks right down the center. “You do it to me too.”

“NO,” Severus says more fiercely.

She shakes her head. “I know you Sev, I know you think that doing this makes you strong. Makes up for all the time you spent in that house afraid. Unable to help her.”

How are things at your house?

Fine.

They’re not arguing anymore?

Oh yes, they’re arguing. But it won’t be that long and I’ll be gone.

Doesn’t your dad like magic?

He doesn’t like anything much.

Severus has gone stock still on the floor of the Great Hall. He’s always hated talking about his family. Usually Lily lets him avoid the subject, though for a long time it killed her—standing idly by while he was hurt. Over and over again.

Okay.

Maybe it still kills her.

“I wish you could see,” she goes on eventually. The whole world disappearing, just as it always used to when it was only the two of them, “that this makes you just like him.”

He physically flinches. “Lily—“ begging now.

“You’re a coward Severus,” her voice is splitters, breaking off in every direction. “For what you did to me, for what you did to Mary? You’re a coward,” she tries to breathe, tries to keep herself under control. Tries to make sure he knows that she means it. She steps forward, leaning closer to him. “I hope you fucking choke.”

You can hate someone and love someone at the same time Lily has learned. First with her sister. Now with Severus. God, she thinks as she pulls back, you used to be my home.

She's barely taken a step towards the doors before McGonagall's voice rings through the silent room. "Miss Evans."

Lily turns to face her, the older woman has walked out from behind the teacher's table, nearly meeting Lily where she stands. "My office," she says sternly. "Now."

Lily doesn't fight it. How could she? Doesn't regret it either. Following McGonagall out of the room with her eyes very determinedly on the space in front of her and not the faces around her.

"Sit," McGonagall says when they get to her office, closing the door behind them with the flick of her wand.

Lily does as she's asked, sitting in the chair in front of the desk and watching as McGonagall takes the one behind it. The ensuing silence makes Lily feel twitchy. The adrenaline pumping through her still demanding action.

Eventually she cracks.

"Look Professor, I understand that what I did broke about a dozen rules and I am fully willing to accept any punishment you see fit. But I absolutely will not be apologizing to him."

McGonagall continues to watch her in silence for another moment before pushing something towards her across the desk. A...tin?

"Have a biscuit Miss Evans," she says casually.

Lily blinks, looking down at the shortbread being offered to her. "Er—" unsure what to do she reaches forward and takes one. "Thank you?"

Professor McGonagall smiles tightly. "If anyone asks, I gave you the dressing down of your life, you understand?"

It takes Lily far too long to catch on to what's happening. "Oh," she says eventually, and when McGonagall arches her brow she quickly adds; "Yes, I will, of course."

"Good," another moment of silence passes before McGonagall speaks again. "I've always liked Mary Macdonald," her voice is as soft as Lily has ever heard it and she isn't sure if it makes her want to laugh or cry.

"Yeah," she croaks eventually, "me too."

PART II: REGULUS

Regulus is on edge, but no one comes for him. He isn't called into any offices, isn't interrogated by any teachers. Or Aurors for that matter. The day actually starts out rather normal. The only signs that something is wrong are the missing faces from the Gryffindor table during breakfast. No Marlene McKinnon, no Lily Evans, no James Potter or Sirius Black or Peter Pettigrew. No Mary Macdonald.

As the day goes on the rumours start to filter through the school. They're vague. Mary Macdonald is in the infirmary. Someone's jealous girlfriend took revenge. No, actually, it was a Quidditch accident. She'd been drinking and fallen off the astronomy tower. She'd been outside after dark and gotten attacked by a werewolf. That one Regulus finds particularly funny because a) as if there could be a werewolf at Hogwarts that no one knew about and b) last night was not a full moon. Regardless, with every reiteration the story gets further and further from the truth and Regulus feels himself start to relax. Maybe this whole thing will blow over?

Then dinner happens.

It's not that he doesn't enjoy watching Snape get his ass handed to him, he really does. The problem is that almost immediately after McGonagall drags Lily Evans away the tone of the rumours start to shift. Mary Macdonald is in the infirmary because of Severus Snape, people start to whisper. Which is not, by and large, a story that Regulus has a problem with, except that it's just close enough to the truth to bring back the pressure behind his ribs.

It is at that moment, with his anxiety on the rise again, that Remus Lupin decides to show up.

"Empty charms classroom, third floor, fifteen minutes," that's all he says before walking away.

Regulus had been hoping they'd forget about the Veritaserum in the wake of Mary's attack. But apparently not. Which is just excellent, because obviously what he wants to be doing after altering someone's memory is be placed under Veritaserum in the presence of three angry hero-complex-having Gryffindors. And yes, he trusts James to keep his promise but he's also not an idiot. He knows Sirius won't stick to the agreement. Knows he'll try to take advantage of the situation. It's just what he's like. But Regulus can't think of any other way to placate him and, by extent, James.

He berates himself as he marches down the hall towards the empty classroom. He knows better than to make threats he doesn't intend to follow through on, because this is the kind of situation you end up in when you do. But stupid Sirius had to be stupid standing there with his stupid...boyfriend? Lover? Regulus pulls a face at the thought of his brother having a "lover" and decides to drop that train of thought all together.

He can feel his hands shaking. He's nervous. Actually, more embarrassing than that, he's scared. He's been going over in his head the different ways he can get around any questions Sirius might ask without lying. It's not possible to disobey the Veritaserum—well, at least not if it's been made by any kind of competent potioneer—but it is possible to control it to some extent. It takes strength though, and thoughtfulness. It also requires you to go slow—if you get on a truth telling roll it can be hard to rein it back in again.

Regulus's feet stutter outside the classroom door and for a moment he considers just walking right by it. But he already has enough hanging over him right now, he doesn't need anymore. With shaking, sweaty hands he reaches for the door and pushes.

"Finally, Merlin, did you fucking crawl here?" Sirius is lying on his back on the teacher's desk at the front of the class, Lupin in the chair beside him and James leaning against the wall.

"Bit bold to be rude to the person in possession of the information you're so desperate to keep quiet."

Sirius sits up so fast Regulus is surprised he doesn't faint. "Is that another threat?"

"More like an accurate summary of the situation."

Sirius growls, hopping off the desk and striding towards him. "Listen here you spoiled brat —"

"Pot meet kettle."

Sirius gives him a shove. "We are not the same."

A cold smirk pulls at the corner of Regulus's mouth. "Aren't we though?"

The rage that that inspires in his older brother is something to behold, eyes going dark, cheeks flushing red. Sirius reaches for something—his wand maybe?—but Lupin pulls him back, just like he did in the corridor.

"Enough," he says quietly.

Sirius is glaring so Regulus makes sure to flash him his most unpleasant smile. He's pretty sure he picked it up from Walburga.

"Let's get this over with shall we?" James says, pushing himself off the wall. Regulus looks at him briefly and then away. It's harder to keep his mask on when James is around.

James kicks out a chair and then gestures to it, Regulus notes that he's not making much eye contact either.

With a confidence that he does not feel, Regulus strides forward and sits, watching as Lupin passes James the potion. His pulse starts to speed up again. James is many things, a good actor is not one of them. There's worry in his eyes when he turns to Regulus. A question.

Because James always asks.

Always.

And Regulus can tell that it's killing him that he can't now—not really. Regulus can't imagine how they convinced Sirius that James should be the one to do this, no doubt he's

already suspicious of something even if it isn't close to the truth. And as Regulus stares at the vile in James's hands all he can think is:

Please not the Mark.

Ask me anything else but don't ask me about the Mark.

I'm not ready to lose him.

Not yet.

Just let me have him for a little longer.

Just let me pretend for a little longer.

Eventually James holds out the potion and Regulus takes it, hoping it's not obvious that his hands are shaking. He turns it over a few times before looking back up. He focuses on James. It helps.

"What's the question?"

Sirius lets out a frustrated huff. "You know what the question is."

But Regulus doesn't look away from James.

"Do you, Regulus Black, intend to expose, in anyway," James goes on, in a tone that suggests this has been rehearsed a few times, "the nature of the relationship between Sirius Black, your brother, and Remus Lupin, to anyone?"

Regulus stares at him and then, because he can't help it, because Sirius brings out all the nasty childish parts of him, he says in a mocking tone; "But what kind of relationship could they possibly have? Sirius isn't gay after all." He gets the reaction he wants. Lupin flinches and Sirius fumes.

"Fuck you Reg."

"Yeah, fuck you right back."

"Okay, Merlin," James steps forward, hand running through his hair as he sends Sirius a look that means something along the lines of "stand down." After a few seconds he turns back to Regulus. It unnerving how much this hurts. Being so close but not being allowed to...know him. To touch him. It hurts more every time they do it.

Weak, the familiar voice in his head sneers. Everyday it sounds more and more like his mother.

I am, he thinks.

I am, I am, I am.

“That okay with you?” James asks.

Regulus blinks. “What?”

“The question?” there’s that concern again.

“Oh,” Regulus shakes himself. “Yes, that’s fine.”

James nods, followed by a moment of silence and Regulus realizes they’re all waiting for him to drink now. He looks down at the glass vial in his hands and fights the urge to smash it on the floor. This is his fault, he knows that, his miscalculation. His optimism that he would be strong enough to set this thing between him and James on fire. But he isn’t. Not yet.

Weak.

He pulls out the stopper and tips the potion into his mouth in one swift motion. If he thinks about it he knows he won’t be able to do it. Better to have it over with fast. He swallows, and then, before he can help himself, he laughs, licking his lips and looking at Lupin.

“Lemon?” he asks.

There’s only the shortest of pauses before Lupin nods. “It came through then?”

“Yeah, covers the aftertaste. It’s smart, most people try to make potions sweet but the lemon won’t interfere with the dandelion root.”

“Yes, exactly,” Lupin seems to almost forget that they don’t like one another and Regulus wonders if this is the potion at work already. If he would have complimented Lupin without it. He thinks he would have, but the uncertainty adds a new level to the anxiety already bubbling inside him.

After a few more seconds of tense silence James turns to Lupin. “How long until it kicks in?”

Lupin shrugs. “Depends on the person but...should be anytime now.”

James opens his mouth but Sirius beats him to it. “I want to be sure—before you ask it I want to be sure the potion is working.”

James grimaces. “And how do you propose we do that?”

Sirius looks at Regulus who feels his pulse speed up to an almost certainly unhealthy level. But James holds his hand out before Sirius can speak.

“You ask me,” he says to Sirius, “if he agrees to answer I’ll ask him.”

A loophole. Regulus is grateful. If Sirius finds this suspicious he doesn’t show it, but Regulus supposes that James being a self righteous asshole is probably par for the course.

“Okay,” Sirius says finally, eyes still on Regulus. “Ask him what his teddybear was called when we were kids.”

Regulus feels his whole body collapse backwards against his chair. That is a question he can answer. James still turns to him, eyebrow raised and Regulus nods, screw embarrassment, he'll can take that over heartbreak any day.

"Regulus," James says firmly, "what was the name of your teddybear when you were a kid?"

He feels it instantly, the tug in his chest, the words ripped out of his head. "Cuddletons."

"Cuddletons?"

"Sir Cuddletons III if you want to be formal." Regulus stares flatly at James who is clearly fighting back a laugh. "Children have given stuffed animals more ridiculous names."

"Have they?" And then, seeming to remember that his friends are in the room with them, James looks at Sirius.

"Yeah, that's it," Sirius nods.

James turns back to Regulus. "Ready?"

He nearly rolls his eyes. "Yes. Please. Lets get this over with."

James holds his stare like he's holding his hand and Regulus wonders if the other two can see it. "Do you, Regulus Black, intend to expose, in anyway, the nature of the relationship between Sirius Black, your brother, and Remus Lupin, to anyone?"

Regulus doesn't waver, feeling the tug again and not trying to fight it. "No."

"Great," James gives him a tight smile, clapping his hands together and turning to his friends. "Well, that was rather anticlimactic but I think we're do—"

"Does he really ask about me?" Sirius cuts across James, looking right at Regulus who blinks back at him.

"Oi!" James objects, but Regulus waves him off.

"I'm on Veritaserum," he says slowly, eyes on his brother, "and that's the question you want to break our agreement to ask?" he can feel the answer tickling the back of his throat, the sensation growing more and more insistent with every moment that he doesn't answer.

There's a pause before Sirius nods. "Yeah," he says, voice a little rough, it surprises Regulus. Sirius has never seemed to care much about their father before. But then, he supposes that's the Black family talent isn't it? Aloofness.

"Yes," he says finally, feeling an exceptional amount of relief as he lets the truth escape his mouth. "I tell him you're okay, that we still talk," the words tumbling out without his permission. "It makes him happy."

Sirius scrunches his face, "Why?"

“Merlin Sirius, enough,” James is standing between them like he can physically shield Regulus from the questions. But this doesn’t feel like foul play. Doesn’t feel like Sirius trying to take advantage, at least not much. It feels sincere.

“Because he loves you,” the words come easily out of his mouth. On this potion he doesn’t have to think, it just rips the thoughts from his head. Terrifying and convenient all at once.

He sees the words hit Sirius, knows how much more they mean because of the Veritaserum. Lupin steps a little closer to him, hand reaching out, squeezing his arm. It’s work for Regulus not to look at James.

“You really believe that?” Sirius asks finally, its only barely a question, more rhetorical than anything, but the potion doesn’t distinguish between rhetorical and sincere. James doesn’t like this, Regulus can see him getting antsy, and he knows he has a right to be. Regulus is letting Sirius take too many liberties. But he’s been waiting for years for Sirius to care about their father.

“Yes,” it’s an easy answer, one he isn’t afraid to give.

Sirius nods slowly. An expression on his face that Regulus can’t decipher. “And you Reg? You really hate me as much as you seem to?”

He feels his eyes go wide. “No,” he grimaces, trying and failing to fight back the next sentence; “I love you. Even when you hurt.” Well, isn’t that embarrassing.

“Sirius, this isn’t fair,” James is saying, but Sirius doesn’t take his eyes off of Regulus and Regulus doesn’t look away.

“Are you okay Reg?” he asks. “Are you—do you need help?”

Oh.

Oh fuck.

He hadn’t been expecting that one.

“I feel like I’m drowning.” The words come out of him too fast, he’s been letting the potion take too much control and he can’t stop himself, can’t modify his answer, can’t stall. It just comes out.

“Reg—“ Sirius starts, sounding somewhere close to heartbroken and honestly, this has been more than enough for Regulus.

“I have to go,” he says, getting to his feet and booking it towards the door.

“Regulus!” Sirius tries again, reaching out for him, but Regulus manages to squeeze past him, narrowly avoiding Sirius’s fingers. He feels shaky, and like he might be ill, pushing through the door of the classroom and into the hall on the other side.

He is not going back to the Great Hall. Not like this. Of course, he isn't exactly sure where he is going. The dorm? Jesus, all he needs is for someone to ask him where he's been or what he's been doing. Fucking Veritaserum. He has to go somewhere safe, somewhere he can ride this out alone without anyone else picking at his fucking soul. He'd expected Sirius to try something, but he'd thought that it would be cruel, something designed to make Regulus squirm. Not whatever the hell that was.

He tries to suppress the memory of his own voice.

I feel like I'm drowning.

God, why did the truth have to sound like that? So small and pathetic? Couldn't he have just said no? Why couldn't that be enough?

"Reg?"

He looks over his shoulder as James comes jogging down the hallway, then quickly checks that they're alone. James rolls his eyes

"Give me a little credit," he mutters under his breath.

"What are you doing—what did you tell them?" he looks behind James, waiting for his brother to appear, but he doesn't.

"Told them I was going to check on Mary," James says, causing Regulus's stomach to squirm more than it already was.

"Oh," he says, not sure what to do with that.

"I'm not going to leave you alone when you're on Veritaserum, c'mon, lets go to the room."

That nearly stops him in his tracks. "Now?"

"Yeah now."

"What about dinner? Your—your friends?"

James rolls his eyes again. "You think I give a shit about any of that right now? After this day?" and for the first time Regulus can hear the exhaustion in his voice. "C'mon," and then he speeds up and Regulus realizes it's so they aren't walking side by side. Because he, Regulus, doesn't want anyone to see them together. And he is simultaneously grateful and so sorry all at once.

They walk like that all the way, James a decent distance ahead, enough that no one passing by would think that they had anything to do with one another, but still close enough that James can keep an eye on him, because Regulus knows James well enough to know that that's what he's doing. On another day, under different circumstances, it might irritate him. But today he just feels warmed by it. Maybe that's the Veritaserum too.

By the time he gets to the spot on the seventh floor James has already disappeared inside, Regulus following quickly after. This is reckless, being here so early, disappearing after a student has been dropped at the infirmary bloodied and cursed. Yet still he feels himself relax the minute he crosses the threshold, no longer in danger of being stopped and asked something he would rather not answer.

James is on the bed, legs crossed. “Are you—“ he stops himself, frowning. And Regulus arches his brow in question.

“Sorry,” James says eventually. “I’m trying not to ask you any questions.”

Of course he is.

Regulus sighs, toeing off his shoes and moving towards the bed, sitting across from James. Their eyes meet and after a few seconds James reaches out and gently brushes a stray curl off of Regulus’s face.

“I’m sorry,” he says finally. “I should have stopped Sirius.”

Regulus lets out a dry laugh. “It’s fine. It was inevitable,” and then; “I thought it would be worse.”

James’s grimaces. “I’m still sorry.”

Which is ridiculous. If anything, James is the one trapped in the middle here, between Regulus and his friends—Regulus and the rest of his life. It isn’t fair. But then, none of what Regulus has asked of him is.

“You can, you know,” he says, after several moments of silence pass.

James looks at him confused. “Can what?”

“Ask me questions.”

It’s a dangerous door to open and Regulus wonders if Lupin did something to the Veritaserum to make him act so carelessly.

James’s look of confusion doesn’t go anywhere, instead it’s joined by surprise and—fear maybe?

“Yeah but you—you can’t really say no—or—under the—“ he frowns, clearly frustrated with his inability to articulate himself. Not that Regulus needs him to.

Regulus shrugs. “I trust you.”

Weak.

He watches James’s eyes widen as he realizes how much that means while Regulus is still under the power of the potion. Personally, Regulus chooses not to think about it. There’s

another beat of stunned silence before a smile starts to pull at the corner of James's mouth that's all kinds of trouble.

"Alright," James licks his lower lip and it's impossible for Regulus to keep his eyes from following his tongue. The bastard. "First time you looked at me and thought "Yeah, I'd shag that."

Regulus rolls his eyes, fully intending to say "I have never thought that," because he likes to think about himself as someone with a certain amount of dignity. Unfortunately, what comes out of his mouth is:

"Third year."

He frowns while James lets out a cackle.

"My third year or yours?"

"Mine," the word jumps out of Regulus's throat. It's uncomfortable to speak truths that you don't want to, but wholly unnatural to speak truths that you didn't even realize existed.

James is absolutely beaming. "What did it for you exactly? My mastery of Quidditch? My witty sense of humour—"

"Yeah that's likely."

James is undeterred. "My irresistible beauty?"

Regulus feels the words coming up his throat and braces himself: "You took your shirt off."

Oh.

Oh wait.

Maybe Regulus does remember this.

The image of James walking up the hill from the Quidditch pitch fills his mind, he sees him grabbing the back of his shirt and yanking it over his head.

Damn Regulus's thirteen year old self.

James laughs. "Irresistible beauty it is then. You really have a thing for shirtless-me, huh?"

"Yes," Regulus says too quickly, he winces. James is so happy he's practically vibrating.

"Go on then," he knocks their knees together. "Ask me something."

Regulus arches his brow. "You take Veritaserum too?"

"Nah, but I'll tell you the truth anyway," he says the words casually, like they cost him nothing. And Regulus knows that that's because they don't. Honesty is easy for James Potter. But it still makes something pull on Regulus's heart.

“Same question,” Regulus says after a moment, because honestly he’s been wondering for the last year what exactly it was that flipped James Potter.

“Ummm,” James tilts his head back, like he’s looking for the answer on the ceiling. “I think it was probably Quidditch. Your first game last year,” he looks back at Regulus. “Or at least that was when I couldn’t ignore it.”

Regulus rolls his eyes. “Of course you have a Quidditch kink.”

“Woah, it’s not a kink.”

Regulus gives him a flat stare.

“What?” James asks indignantly. “It’s not, it’s just—tight white pants and you—you handle that broom so fucking well.”

Regulus almost chokes. “Sorry, was that a dick metaphor?”

“What?” James looks genuinely affronted. “No, you just, you’re so powerful out there, so in control of everything, it’s...hot.” There’s actual blush on James’s cheeks and that happens so rarely—because James is shameless—that Regulus can’t help but stare for a minute. He’s not sure if James notices but he must. Eventually Regulus coughs, clearing his throat and dropping his eyes.

“Go on then, next question,” he prompts.

He sees the moment James thinks of a question and the moment he falters—like he doesn’t know whether or not he can ask it.

“James?” he says, and James looks up at him sheepishly and then away.

“You—ah—“ he laughs nervously, scrubbing at the back of his neck, and Regulus finds himself intrigued now. “You really love me?” James finally manages. Taking Regulus by surprise.

“You think I don’t?”

James shrugs. “No—I don’t know—I think sometimes I can sort of, push you into things.”

Which is ridiculous and Regulus is about to say so except the truth is currently pushing uncomfortably against his teeth. He rolls his eyes, feeling confident in his answer until he hears himself say; “I’ve loved you since I was eleven years old.”

Regulus very promptly shuts his mouth. And then, before he can help it, he laughs. Because yes, okay, he’s thought that before, but he hadn’t really believed it was true. It was—hyperbole, melodrama, teen angst—he hadn’t really thought—I mean yes, it had felt like love, but all crushes do at eleven don’t they?

It’s only after a few moments of spiralling that Regulus realizes James hasn’t said anything, which is entirely out of character for him. He looks up to find the other boy staring back at

him, wide eyed.

“Since you were eleven?” he says, his voice a tangled mess of reverence and pride and absolute confusion.

Regulus shrugs, but, of course, James phrased that as a question and before he knows it more words are bubbling out of his mouth; “It’s always been you really. For me.” And oh boy, does he hate saying that out loud, hate knowing that it’s true. He closes his eyes then, like maybe if he can’t see James he’ll forget those words ever came out of his mouth.

Weak.

“Reg,” James says eventually.

Regulus keeps his eyes closed. “Yeah, okay, maybe questions was a bad idea. We should move on, I’ve embarrassed myself enough for one day I think.”

“Regulus—“ he cuts himself off and Regulus isn’t really sure what’s going on and then; “Can I touch you?”

“Where?”

“Face?”

Slowly Regulus nods, still not opening his eyes. “Yeah, okay.”

When James’s touch comes it’s soft and familiar and after a moment Regulus feels himself leaning into it. James starts by cupping his cheek, hand eventually sliding down so that his thumb can trace the line of Regulus’s lower lip. Regulus feels over sensitive, like with his eyes closed every touch is ten times more intense, goose bumps pebbling his skin. After a while James starts carding his hand softly through Regulus’s curls, and Regulus is embarrassed when he hears himself hum in appreciation.

“Can I kiss you?” James asks after a few minutes.

“Yes.”

James’s hand falls to the back of his neck, pulling him forward, their mouths meeting gently. It starts sweet, their lips pressed together, Regulus’s hands still at his sides. But slowly he feels the heat building, feels them falling onto the mattress, pulling themselves closer together. James’s mouth opens, Regulus’s hands sliding under his shirt, soaking up the heat of his bare skin.

James kisses along his jaw, down his neck, pulling lightly on Regulus’s hair and ripping a groan out of him. Instantly the sound brings James’s lips back to his—like he’s trying to taste it. And then he slides his thigh between Regulus’s legs and the friction is—

“Oh,” the sound punches out of Regulus, his eyes flying open for the first time.

James pauses, pulling back just enough to see his face. “You okay?”

“Y-yeah, yeah, it’s...good.”

And it is, which is the problem. Regulus doesn’t know what to do with “good.” He doesn’t feel good during sex, he never has. He feels numb or he feels panicked. But this is—

“Fuck,” he drops his head against James’s shoulder, his body moving instinctually. Without technique or grace.

“You’re so fucking beautiful,” James’s voice is husky as he presses his mouth against Regulus’s ear. “I can’t stand it sometimes. I have these dreams—I wake up so fucking hard I barely need to touch myself.”

Regulus hears himself whimper, nails digging into James’s arms as he ruts against him.

“Sometimes all I have to do is think about your mouth and I get there.”

God. He’s not going to last.

And that thought hits him like a brick wall.

Because he’s never done this before with someone else and he feels like his skin is alive with the anticipation. A tingly feeling running through him, making him shiver at the thought of what they’re building up to. What he’s building up to.

“Still okay?” James asks, sounding out of breath, his words hot on Regulus neck.

He nods, not sure he can quite find his voice, nipping at James’s lip and looking up to find James’s eyes blown wide with desperation. “God,” James groans, hands roaming over Regulus’s body, touching every part of him, pulling him closer as Regulus keeps grinding against his thigh.

“You’re so good Reg, so fucking good,” another embarrassing noise leaves Regulus’s mouth as he drops his head, pressing it against James’s chest. There’s a part of him, through the haze of “yes, yes, yes” and “more, more, more,” that is terrified. Terrified of the feelings building inside of him, terrified of the fact that James is seeing them, the fact that he has the power to cause them. Normally that terror takes over. Normally that terror takes all the good parts of this and turns them into dark bedrooms and hands covering his mouth.

But then James starts sucking on his neck, going at it with purpose, and Regulus squirms under the attention, feeling like every nerve in his body is being turned on, holding him solidly in the moment. Here and now.

“I know it’s fucked up,” James rambles into his skin, he sounds wrecked though Regulus isn’t sure how he can be, he’s hardly touched him. “But sometimes all I think when I see you with other people is how much I want to fucking own you. To have them know that you’re mine.” He keeps working on Regulus’s neck between words, licking and kissing and biting.

“Because you are, aren’t you?” his voice rolls through Regulus like thunder. “Mine?”

Regulus shivers. He should say no, because it is fucked up. But James's voice and his hands and his mouth are making him feel loose and out of control in a way he isn't used to. And some pathetic needy part of him wants to be owned. To be marked. To belong.

James's teeth sink a little deeper into his skin ripping the; "Yes," from Regulus's throat.

James shifts, somehow managing to press more of himself against Regulus, the pressure sending a jolt of pleasure through Regulus's whole body. And suddenly he is nothing but feeling. No words or thoughts or distinguishable parts. Every molecule in his body humming with something that makes his toes curl and his voice crack, noises leaving his mouth that he has no control over. For a minute he feels like a live-wire, every touch a little too much and also so fucking good. His heart beating fast as he collapses further into James, all the tension draining out of his body, leaving him boneless and sated.

After a few minutes or hours or days—because honestly Regulus can't tell—he feels James kiss the top of his head, bringing him more into focus.

"You okay?" James asks.

Regulus nods, before realizing that he's been incredibly selfish. "Sorry," he croaks, hand reaching out, "You must be—" but he stutters to a stop when he finds his way to James's crotch, which is damp and soft.

He pulls back, looking at James, who has the audacity to hold his gaze without even seeming embarrassed.

"James," Regulus says slowly. "Did you just come from... watching me?"

His cheeks are rosy as he smiles. "Might have, yeah."

Regulus goes to laugh, except for some reason it comes out choked, and he watches the mirth drain from James's face instantly.

"Reg?"

And he wants to answer except suddenly he's too hot, this new overwhelming feeling in his chest. He rolls away from James, onto his back, trying to breathe through it, only to find, to his horror, that he's crying. And not subtle, quiet tears, but ones where his chest hitches and his shoulders shake and he quickly brings his hands to his face.

James is sitting up now. "Shit, Regulus, are you—was that—"

But Regulus shakes his head, unable to stop fucking sobbing. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I don't know why I-I'm crying," he wishes he sounded angry because he feels angry—angry at himself for doing this.

"Was it too much?" James asks softly.

Again, Regulus shakes his head. "No. No—fuck—it was perfect."

James just sits there silently for a moment and Regulus doesn't blame him, if he was James he'd be walking out of the fucking room at this point because clearly Regulus is completely unhinged.

"Can I touch you?" James says eventually, and Merlin it must be so annoying for him to have to ask that all the time.

"Yes."

James shuffles up the bed a little, leaning against the headboard before pulling Regulus to him—on him really, into his lap—and Regulus goes willingly, curling up against James's chest as James rests his chin on the top of his head.

"I'm sorry," Regulus says again, because he's so fucking mortified he doesn't know what else to say. The sobbing has started to slow down, turning into intermittent hiccups as James rubs circles into his back.

"Are you okay?"

"Yes."

"Were you okay before—while we were..."

"Yes," Regulus repeats emphatically.

James kisses the top of his head. "Then I don't know what you're apologizing for."

Regulus doesn't bother dignifying that with an answer and the Veritaserum must be wearing off because nothing compels him to.

Eventually James goes on, "It's a lot Reg, it's a lot for me too. But as long as you're okay..." he feels James shrug. "I don't really care about the rest of it. Just don't let me push you, alright?"

Regulus presses impossibly closer, because James is warm and steady and he is weak. "Yeah," he says eventually. "Okay." And then, voice small; "Do you know where our wands are? Because I could really use a cleaning spell."

And because James Potter is a bastard he laughs.

They shouldn't fall asleep. It's reckless—tonight's theme apparently—but they do anyway. James cleans the pair of them up and then wraps himself around Regulus again and it's nice and easy, and Regulus is fucking exhausted after the past few days. It only takes a few minutes of James's warmth before his eyelids start to get heavy.

He has a vague memory of James getting up at some point to take off his trousers. He has a thing about sleeping in trouser—mainly his thing is that he won't do it.

“Go back to sleep,” he says as he slides back into bed.

“We should go,” Regulus mumbles, because he has a sneaking suspicion that Mary Macdonald’s attack is going to result in more intense curfew policing and no doubt they’ll already be looking into his dorm after what happened tonight at dinner. The last thing he needs to be doing is disappearing. Despite all that he doesn’t actually try to get up, instead rolling towards James and placing his head on his chest.

“I’ll wake us up early,” James whispers.

Regulus falls asleep to the sound of his heartbeat.

When he blinks awake again the room is still dark and without windows it’s hard to tell how much time has past. Eventually, when he comes to enough, he realizes that James is running his hand through his hair.

“Hey,” Regulus croaks, nuzzling against James’s chest before he can stop himself.

“Hey,” James says softly, kissing his temple.

“Time to go?”

“Almost,” James says.

Regulus hums, enjoying the feeling of James’s fingers brushing against his scalp. It takes a while before he’s really able to process how early it must be. James has Quidditch practice at the crack of dawn so if it isn’t time to go yet it must not even be five A.M. For some reason that makes something tighten in his chest.

“Did you sleep?” he finally manages to ask.

James makes a non-committal noise. “A bit, couldn’t quite get my brain to shut off.”

Regulus’s chest grows tighter. “What were you thinking about?”

James doesn’t answer, like he’s pretending that in the absolute quiet of their room there’s some way he could have not heard. Regulus considers letting it go, because right now this feels so good and he’s afraid of ruining it. But eventually his curiosity gets the best of him.

“James? What were you thinking about?” he feels wrung out after yesterday, from the fear and anxiety and intimacy. He’s afraid he won’t be able to handle what’s coming.

“Nothing, I was just thinking about yesterday and—anyway, it’s nothing.”

But it is very clear from his tone that it is not nothing. “James?”

“You said—“ James starts and stops, like he can’t make up his mind about whether or not to continue. Eventually he seems to accept that he’s not getting out of this without giving Regulus something. “You said you felt like you were drowning.”

Oh.

Regulus had really been hoping they would just skip over that bit.

“Yeah,” he manages finally.

“What did you mean by that?”

Regulus forces himself not to tense because he knows that James would be able to feel it.

“I don’t know.”

The hand in Regulus’s hair stills and then he hears James sigh. “Reg—“

Regulus sits up abruptly, shrugging James off as he rests his elbows on his knees and scrubs the remaining sleep from his eyes. “Please James, just leave it.”

But for once James doesn’t listen to him.

“I just—I just don’t understand. Because I’m here Reg, I’m here, you don’t have to—I’m not sure how to make you get that? How many times I have to say it?”

Regulus grinds his teeth. “And I’m not sure how many times I have to tell you that it’s not enough.”

That, Regulus is willing to admit, was the wrong thing to say.

“Ah,” James says eventually, a weird stiffness in his voice. “Okay then,” Regulus listens as James gets out of bed, feeling his heart sink. He watches him grab his trouser off the floor, pulling them up over his boxers.

“James—“

But it’s his turn to get cut off. James still speaking in that strange tone of voice—brittle, Regulus realizes—ready to crack. “Sorry that I’m not enough,” he doesn’t look at Regulus when he says it. There’s definitely anger there. Anger and a tangle of other emotions that Regulus doesn’t want to be responsible for.

James starts walking towards the door which results in Regulus doing one of the most pathetic things he’s done to date—including crying after sex—blocking his path. Like some heroine in a romance novel.

It’s clumsy, he’s still sleepy and he practically trips on his way to stand in front of the door.

“Fuck, James, please. I didn’t mean that.”

James stops in front of him, staring for a long time before he sighs, running a hand through his hair. “Thing is Regulus, I think you did.”

“Not the way you—“ Regulus exhales, trying to get himself in order. “I just meant that things—things with me are so big. They’re too big to be solved by one person.”

But he can tell before James even opens his mouth that he isn’t buying it. Regulus wonders if that’s some of his hubris bleeding through—nothing is too big for James Potter, the saviour of all beaten dogs.

“I got Sirius out.”

It is work for Regulus to hold his tongue, to keep back the plethora of sharp remarks begging to come out of his mouth. He’s getting incredibly tired of this comparison.

“I am not my brother,” he says coldly. “His choices are not mine.”

“I don’t think Sirius saw himself as having choices.”

“Well,” Regulus says stonily, “he did.”

“And you don’t think the same could be said about you?”

“No.”

James shakes his head. “The problem Reg,” he says eventually, “is that sometimes it feels like you wanna be stuck. Like you’ve already told yourself the story of your life, decided where it’s going to go, decided what you’re going to get and you’re not willing change it.”

Regulus opens his mouth indignantly but finds he doesn’t really know what to say. He’s wrong, James is wrong, but he can’t find the words to tell him how. To tell himself how. He doesn’t want to be stuck, why would he want that?

“Look,” James says eventually, “I have to get going, I have Quidditch.”

No, Regulus wants to say.

Get back in bed.

I want to feel your hand in my hair.

I want to hear your heartbeat.

I want you to promise you still love me.

Because he hadn’t said it. Last night Regulus had cut himself open and laid himself bare but James hadn’t said it. And he knows that it’s just semantics, that it doesn’t mean anything, but in this moment it feels important.

His whole being revolts as he finds himself saying none of that, silently moving out of the way instead.

“James?” he says as James gets one foot out the door. He turns back. “I love you.” Regulus fidgets, uncertainty smothering his words.

There’s only a brief pause, but it’s enough to sting. “I love you too Reg,” James says, and for the first time Regulus isn’t sure that he believes him.

Chapter End Notes

Hey! Hi! Hello!

I'm sorry this is so late, I promise I really do want to keep getting out a chapter a week!

I hope you liked it! ALSO I'm sorry I didn't reply to more comments on the last chapter, I meant to and then somehow stuff kept coming up and distracting me but I appreciate every one of them!

Thank you as always for reading!

Chapter 27

Chapter Summary

This chapter sounds like: Now We're Awake (And Everything is Okay) - Alaskan Tapes

Chapter Notes

tw: Discussions of sexual assault

cw: Discussions about sex (this probably doesn't need to be here but sometimes I get nervous that I'm not cw as much as I should SO this is like not a ****sexy**** discussion it's very much dumb boys pretend they know about sex)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

I'm here Reg. I'm here.

And I'm not sure how many times I have to tell you that it's not enough.

James starts having nightmares again. He's not sure why. It's been almost a year, and it's not like anything has happened. At least not to him. They're different than they were before. Regulus is always standing alone in the dark. Not because it's nighttime, or because someone has turned out the lights, but because there's nothing else. No walls or floors. No sky, no earth. Everything is black and he's just sort of...there. Alone. Afraid. James calls out to him but he doesn't hear. Reaches for him but he doesn't feel. And honestly, that's scary enough. To watch the terror growing in his eyes and not being able to do anything about it. The dreams could end there and James would still wake up in a cold sweat.

They don't end there though.

At some point, while James grows more hysterical in his attempts to get to Regulus—to get Regulus to even just look at him—hands start reaching out of the dark. If they belong to bodies James never sees them. Just hands. They grab hold of Regulus's ankles, his calves, his wrists. And Regulus starts screaming. Begging. James. James. James. His voice splits open, it cracks itself in two calling out for him.

I'm here Reg. I'm here.

And I'm not sure how many times I have to tell you that it's not enough.

James sits up, breathing heavy, sheets damp with sweat. He's shaking, biting down on his tongue to keep back whatever it is that's stuck in his throat. A sob. A scream. His supper. He cast a silencing charm over his bed before he went to sleep, does it every night. He can only imagine the things he's yelling.

It takes a few minutes but he starts to settle, breath slowly evening out. It's late but not nearly late enough, still another three hours before he can justify getting ready for Quidditch practice. That being said, there's no way in hell he's going back to sleep. After a few seconds of indecision he throws his blankets off, pulling himself out of bed.

If he's going to be awake he might as well be useful. He grabs the Charms essay he'd been working on and slips out of the dormitory, trying not to resent the fact that Remus is clearly no longer sleeping in his own bed. Grumbling to himself he trudges down to the common room.

"Someone's up late."

His head snaps up as he reaches the last step, finding a pair of sparkling brown eyes staring back at him.

"What the hell?" is all his half-asleep brain seems able to come up with.

Mary cocks her brow. "And good evening to you too." She's curled up in the corner of the couch, a pink housecoat James has never seen her wear before wrapped around her, face washed clean of make up, leaving her looking incredibly young.

"Sorry," James brings his free hand up to scrub his face. "Still a bit out of it."

Mary nods, eyes drifting towards the fire. "Tell me about it." A long moment of awkward silence passes before she rolls her eyes. "Well, are you gonna sit or are you going to keep standing there?"

James snaps awake. "Oh—yeah—er—right."

He drops his coursework on the coffee table and collapses next to Mary on the couch, sighing as he sinks down, head falling back so he ends up staring at the ceiling.

"That was a big sigh," Mary says.

James smiles dryly, rolling his head towards her. "No one gets up in the middle of the night for a little sigh."

The corners of her mouth twitch up. "Touché."

He yawns, turning back to the ceiling. "When are you allowed to start Quidditch again?" he asks, because if he doesn't start talking he's going to fall asleep and that's the last thing he

wants.

It's Mary's turn to sigh. "Not until after Christmas."

James winces. "Fuck."

"Head injuries are apparently serious," she goes on flatly.

"Oh yeah, I vaguely remember that being mentioned." Another pause, the low-burning fire crackling in front of them. James wonders absentmindedly what the house elves do if the common room never empties—do they still come and clean it?

"We'll hold strong until you get back, only one more game anyway. We're gonna take it this year, I can feel it," he finds himself saying.

Mary makes a noncommittal noise that draws James's eyes to her. She's been back from the infirmary all weekend but tomorrow—toady, actually, he supposes—will be her first day in classes again.

James nudges her gently with his foot. "You okay Macdonald?"

A long moment of silence passes. "Have you ever felt helpless?" she asks, eyes still on the fire.

James nods, slowly. "Yeah, all the time."

Mary's fingers fidget with the sleeve of her housecoat. Despite the fact that she's sitting next to him she feels far away. Like she's drifting. James has the sudden desire to reach out and anchor her.

"Not me," she says finally. "I've never been helpless," she bites down on her lower lip and James isn't sure if she's going to continue, but then; "when I was little I used to watch all these movies, and no matter what the story was the girl always needed to be rescued. Like just, constantly. It didn't matter if she was one of the heroes or a love interest or whatever. And I hated that. So I made this list in my head of all the things I needed to know," she laughs at herself. "I thought; I'll learn all this stuff—how to swim and fight and untie knots and fly planes—I'll learn all this stuff, and then I'll rescue myself."

James smiles, because yeah, that sounds just like Mary, even if he doesn't really know much about Muggle movies or what the hell a plane is.

"And did you?" he asks.

He can see her swallow.

"No," her voice is tight. "I got a letter telling me I was a Witch. Figured, what do I need to learn how to fight for? I have a wand now. I have magic. Who's going to be able to touch me?" Somewhere beneath the anger and bitterness is something that hurts.

James doesn't know what to say to that. Most people would probably go with something along the lines of: I'm sorry.

I'm sorry this happened.

Sorry it happened to you.

Sorry you're hurting.

But he knows Mary well enough not to. It'd only irritate her.

"Any word on Mulciber?" he asks instead.

A cold smile spreads across her face. "They tried to expel him but his parents are kicking up a fuss. They have friends in high places apparently."

James grimaces. "Fuck."

Mary nods. "They promised me—McGonagall and Dumbledore—that he won't be in class, that he'll be doing all his school work in Slughorn's office. Temporarily, anyway."

"Temporarily?"

She nods. "Until he gets expelled or his parents get what they want and he's let off the hook."

"He used an unforgivable," James says, outrage breaking through his exhaustion. "They can't just do nothing."

Mary's eyes narrow, glaring down at the fire. "Yeah, well, maybe not."

"Maybe not what?"

She keeps glaring. "Maybe he didn't use an unforgivable."

There's a beat of silence, before James runs a hand over his face.

"Okay, I'm pretty tired here, so you're going to have to explain that one to me."

"I'm going to have to explain it to myself too," she mutters. And then, after a bitter silence: "They checked his wand."

James blinks. "Okay?"

Mary grits her teeth, and James can see the muscles sliding in her jaw. "No Imperius."

It takes a moment for that to really sink in. "Oh."

"Yeah."

"But you were so sure..."

“Yeah.”

“How—“

“The working theory is I hit my head so nothing I think is reliable,” she sighs, collapsing back into the couch and closing her eyes, squeezing them shut. Her fingers come up and start massaging her temples.

James shakes his head, trying to wrap his mind around this. “Just because he didn’t Imperius you doesn’t mean he didn’t still...”

“Crack my skull open?” she finishes for him.

“Yeah.”

“Maybe.”

“Maybe?”

She sighs, dropping her hand and looking at him. There are only the tiniest cracks in Mary’s shield—a spec of fear hiding in her eyes, in the corner of her mouth.

“Maybe,” she repeats again. “But I hit my head so nothing I think is reliable. Maybe he wasn’t even there. Maybe I made it all up. Maybe I slipped and fell and the rest is just some delusion.”

James hears himself growl. “That’s bullshit”

He almost gets a smile for that.

“I think so too, believe it or not,” she says dryly. “But then part of me almost hopes that they’re right.” Her hand goes to the back of her head, James wonders if she even knows she’s doing it.

“Why?” he asks eventually.

Her eyes have gone back to the fire, the light washing her out, exaggerating the bags under her eyes.

“Because I’ve never been helpless.”

James hasn’t spoken to Regulus in days and he thinks it’s starting to get to him. Which, if he’s being honest with himself, is a bit pathetic. So he does his best not to be honest with himself.

It isn’t on purpose, the not talking to Reg. Well, not on his end. He has a feeling Regulus is avoiding him and he isn’t sure why. Reg has excuses, of course—Prefect duty, homework, Quidditch practice. Not to mention the professors have started patrolling the halls at night,

after the incident with Mary, and, as Regulus pointed out, not everyone has an invisibility cloak. James clings to these excuses, uses them to comfort himself when he starts feeling anxious. He knows they aren't true of course, but it's easier to pretend.

Which is also pathetic.

He really hates being honest with himself.

"Oi!" a balled-up piece of parchment collides with James's head. "Pay attention to me!"

James rolls his eyes, turning onto his stomach so he can glare at Sirius who is sitting on his own bed looking smug.

"He's alive!" Sirius crows dramatically.

"You're a brat."

Sirius's grin only widens. "One of my better qualities. You going to tell be why you're sulking?"

James frowns. "I'm not sulking."

"That's a no then."

"Brat."

James lurches to the side just in time to dodge Sirius's pillow.

"Good thing you're a Beater because you can't aim for shit," James smirks as he pulls himself upright. Sirius gives him the finger.

"Pretty sure Beaters need to aim, or do you have yours just shooting Bludgers in random directions?"

"I like to keep my players on their toes."

"Uh-huh," Sirius smirks shaking his head. "Whatever you say El Capitan."

Sirius has a pile of coursework around him that he's clearly been ignoring. To be fair, since he and Remus have started...doing whatever it is that they're doing...Sirius has been a much better student. James is pretty sure getting work done is like foreplay for Remus.

"So," Sirius says, as though he can hear James's thoughts. "You shag your boy yet?"

A host of unwanted memories flood James's thoughts. Regulus pressed against him, the tiny sounds escaping his mouth like he couldn't help it, the look on his face when he'd—

"Merlin Sirius, what the hell?" he says, attempting to push all thoughts of Regulus out of his head, resenting the curl of want that he already feels in his stomach just from thinking about

him. Followed almost instantly by a pang of fear. Fear that he's never going to get to see Regulus like that again. Fear that something has happened that he didn't notice and now it's all slipping through his fingers.

They fought. He gets that. But it hadn't been relationship ending, had it?

Had it?

Had.

It.

"Jeez, you're such a prude," Sirius teases. He leans back, knocking a few of his textbooks onto the floor.

"Not a prude," James manages to say.

Sirius arches his brow. "No? How far have you two gotten then?"

James has a very clear memory of Regulus telling him not to talk about sex with Sirius.

"Listen, I don't—"

"Because me and Moony—"

"OH MY GOD," James grabs the pillow Sirius had thrown at him and holds it over his ears. "Don't you fucking dare!"

Sirius is already laughing. "Your face," he wheezes, holding his stomach. "Not a prude my ass."

Now it's James's turn to throw a pillow. "Are you trying to scar me or something? Jesus Christ."

Sirius is still laughing. "Listen," he has to stop to take a breath. "I'm just trying to figure out what the normal procedure is here."

James blinks back at him. "Normal procedure?"

"Yeah, you know like, I know how it works with girls, how things...progress. But this is new territory for me. What are the steps? What are the rules? Is it hand job, blow job, and then..." he raises his eyebrows and James is not entirely sure that he even knows what's being implied, "or are there other steps I'm missing?"

"Steps?" now he just sounds like a parrot.

"You know—like first base, second base, third," Sirius is looking at James like he should know what they're talking about.

"What's a base?" James asks.

Sirius shrugs. “I don’t know, it’s just something people say.”

James looks at him skeptically. “What people?”

“Just people—look, forget about the bases, just, how’s this supposed to go? How do I up my game?”

It’s James’s turn to laugh now, running a hand through his hair. “Shit Sirius, I don’t know. I don’t really think about it that much. I just...do what...feels good?”

Sirius looks at him for a minute before shaking his head. “I mean, it all feels good I would hope. I just...wanna make sure I check all the boxes.”

James feels terribly out of his depth. “Honestly, I’m the wrong person to talk to about this.”

A funny expression flickers across Sirius’s face. “You’re the only person to talk to about this.”

Which James realizes might actually be true and also is pretty tragic for the both of them because he’s pretty sure neither of them have a clue what they’re doing. James doesn’t even know what bases are.

“Er—okay—well,” James rubs at the back of his neck. “I’m pretty sure as long as you’re checking the “getting off” box, you’re doing okay.”

“Wow, you really don’t know shit about sex do you?”

James glares at him. “Fuck you.”

“After this conversation I’d really rather you didn’t,” Sirius says grinning. James is running out of pillows to throw.

“Seriously though,” Sirius moves back to the centre of his bed. “I’ve been doing some research.”

James arches his brow. “Research?” is sex something you have to research?

“Yeah, magazines and stuff, and there’s so much shit I’ve never seen,” he wrinkles his nose.

“And some shit I do not need to see ever again. But it’s like there’s this whole world of sex out there that I didn’t even know about. And things I never thought of—like lube, do you use lube?”

“Uh—no?” should he?

“Apparently there’s a spell for it, which I am sure as shit gonna learn because that sounds convenient as hell.”

James makes a non-committal noise, only vaguely aware of what you might use lube for. He wonders if Reg knows more about this stuff but then, he doubts Regulus is spending his free time researching sex.

“So what do you reckon?”

James blinks, looking back at Sirius who is watching him expectantly, and James has the feeling that he’s missed something.

“About?” he asks eventually, when Sirius doesn’t explain.

Sirius waves his hand impatiently. “Top or bottom?”

Which makes absolutely no sense to James so he just keeps staring blankly at Sirius who eventually starts smirking.

“Oh come on James, you know what I’m saying?”

No. He really doesn’t.

When James keeps staring, Sirius lets out an exasperated—if slightly fond—sigh. “Oh my God, I can’t believe I have to explain this to you.”

And just because he’s feeling a little snippy about being patronized, James snaps back, “Nobody is asking you to.”

But one of Sirius’s favourite hobbies is knowing more than other people and James can already see the look in his eyes that means there’s no way Sirius is going to pass-up this opportunity.

“Are you the one getting or...y’know...giving.”

Even that, James is embarrassed to admit, takes him a minute to figure out. But he does figure it out. Without needing anymore clarification from Sirius, thank God.

“Oh—Christ, really Sirius?”

“It’s a valid question!”

“According to who?”

Sirius waves his arms around. “People James. People. Jesus. It’s like you’ve never heard of sex in your life.”

“I’ve heard of sex,” James grumbles petulantly.

“If you say so.”

“Reading a magazine doesn’t make you a porn star,” he adds, because it’s true, but it doesn’t seem to bother Sirius.

“I’ll lend you some if you want.”

“I really don’t need your secondhand wank material thanks.”

But Sirius just grins. “Sure about that? You might learn something. Your boy would appreciate it I’m sure.”

James shakes his head. “This is officially my least favourite conversation I have ever had,” which only sets Sirius off cackling again.

“Do you need me to explain what a condom is?”

“That’s it, I’m leaving, I hate you, goodbye.”

“Maybe that’s too advanced,” Sirius wheezes through his laughter because he is objectively an evil person. “We can start simpler. See, kissing is when two people—”

James shoves him on his way out of the room, still able to hear him giggling from the stairwell.

James. James. James.

I’m here Reg. I’m here.

And I’m not sure how many times I have to tell you that it’s not enough.

James and Mary end up falling into a kind of routine. One which largely involves the two of them sleep deprived and sitting on the couch in the Gryffindor common room in the middle of the night. Sometimes Mary brings the Muggle candy her parents send her from home. James was skeptical at first but it’s actually pretty good, and nothing is vomit flavoured or trying to bite him so he might even like it better than wizard candy. He says as much to Mary who laughs.

They talk a lot, because there’s not really anything else to do. James gives up on trying to get homework done. He might not be able to sleep but that doesn’t mean he’s fully functioning at three in the morning.

He learns a lot about Mary, who apparently he didn’t know as well as he thought. He learns that she has three siblings, all Muggles like her parents. He learns that her brother plays football, which is like Muggle Quidditch.

“Well actually, it’s nothing like Quidditch at all, but same idea,” Mary corrects herself, succeeding only in further confusing James.

“How can it be nothing like Quidditch but also the same idea?”

Mary gives him an exasperated look like that’s the stupidest question she’s ever heard. “They’re both sports.” The “duh” seems to be implied.

James decides to let it go.

He learns other stuff too. Like that Amos Diggory is apparently a very bad kisser.

“Too many teeth,” Mary shivers. James does not press her for details.

And that butter tarts are her favourite desert, and lilacs her favourite flowers and she’s never been to Paris but she’s certain she’ll end up there one day—living in some beautiful apartment, buying bread at the local bakery every morning and drinking red wine and smoking hand rolled cigarets.

“I can just feel it you know?” she says, it’s the most sincere he thinks he’s ever seen her. “That’s where I’m supposed to be.”

He smiles back, her energy a little contagious even in the middle of the night. “I’m sure you’ll get there.”

He tells her stuff too, of course. About his parents. His mum.

“They wanted a kid so bad, tried everything, tried for ages,” James is on the floor, leaning back against the couch, lower lip caught between his teeth. “Sometimes I feel the weight of that—of being their miracle. Of trying to deserve all the love they’ve spent years saving up. Does that sound selfish? That my biggest problem is being loved too much?” He laughs at himself, voice still tight.

Mary shakes her head. “No,” she says confidently. “It makes perfect sense.”

They remind him of the astronomy tower, these little talks, remind him of those first few weeks of sneaking up there to see Regulus before he really knew what he was doing. Where any of it was going. Of sitting and talking for hours and hours, about nothing and everything. It makes his chest ache so bad his hand comes up to press against his ribs, like he’s trying to keep something in, keep something together. It’s been nearly a week now since he last talked to Reg. He stares at the map every night but Regulus never goes to the room. Yesterday James went anyway. Because he missed it. Because he had this ridiculous hope that somehow Regulus would know that he was there.

He doesn’t know what he did. So he runs through everything they said the morning after the Veritaserum. Runs through it again and again. Making new wounds, pouring salt in the old ones.

He’d told Regulus once that even if he walked away he would always come back. It had never occurred to him that one day there wouldn’t be anyone to come back to.

Mostly he just misses him. With his whole body. With every inch of himself.

“What are your nightmares about?” Mary is lying on the couch on her back, James mirroring her position on the carpet, both of them staring at the ceiling. The question comes after a long period of silence.

“You don’t have to tell me,” she goes on, not sounding apologetic—she never is.

Mostly, when he can help it, when he's awake, he does his best not to think about his dreams. Not to go back there. Not to let those images in. Hands and darkness and Regulus screaming his name. He shivers.

"Letting someone down," he croaks, deciding to keep it vague. He has to clear his throat before he can say anymore. "There's someone who needs me and I can't get to them—I'm there and I can see it all happening, hear them screaming, but I can't save them." He closes his eyes briefly, swallowing.

There's a moment of silence and James wonders if Mary's actually fallen asleep but then she speaks; "You really are the Gryffindor poster boy huh?"

James snorts. "Don't think Gryffindor had nightmares. Too brave."

"You can't be brave if you aren't afraid of something."

"Isn't that the definition of bravery? Being fearless?" he turns his head just in time to see her roll her eyes.

"No, bravery is facing your fears, standing your ground when you want to run. Only psychopaths are fearless."

James has never thought about it like that before—never thought of fear as a necessary part of bravery—though he supposes he should have.

"What're your nightmares about then?" he finds himself asking.

It's funny that he somehow manages to hear Mary go silent even though she hadn't been speaking to begin with. There's a shift in the space around her—a tightening of her whole body.

"You don't have to answer," he does sound apologetic—he always is.

The silence stretches on and James watches her profile from his spot on the floor. Watches her chest rise and fall. He tries not to fidget, fights the urge to speak. Eventually Mary closes her eyes.

"I think I was raped."

The first thing he thinks is: Regulus never says it. Can't even hear the word.

The second thing he thinks is: oh my God.

"I dream about it," Mary goes on when James remains silent. "I can feel the weight of him—I can smell him—his skin—" she falters, voice cutting off sharply.

"Did you tell McGonagall?" James finds himself asking, not knowing if that's the right response. "Dumbledore?"

Mary exhales heavily, a wry smile in the corner of her mouth. “They barely believe me about the curse, I can’t imagine they’ll take this very seriously. I don’t even know what I would say. That I have dreams about some boy lying on top of me? That I don’t know what’s going on but I know I don’t want it. I don’t—like it,” she lets out a humourless laugh. “I’m not even sure I believe me.”

Something twists in James’s stomach. “I believe you.”

Mary opens her eyes at that, turning to look at him. “Yeah?”

James nods, sitting upright so he can look at her properly. “Yes.”

“You know I hit my head pretty hard. I’m not a very reliable source.”

“I believe you.”

After a minute she gives him a sad smile. “You’re a good guy James Potter.”

“Mary,” he says softly. “What do you need? What do you want to do? I—what do you need?” he doesn’t know. He doesn’t know what to do. Just knows that if she tells him he’ll do it.

She shakes her head. “I don’t know what I need honestly.”

“You want me to beat the shit out of Mulciber?” James isn’t entirely sure he won’t do that anyway.

There’s a pause. Mary presses the heels of her hands into her eyes, not the way people do when they’re crying but like she has a headache. Like she’s trying to push something through the back of her skull. James wants to tell her to be careful. He doesn’t.

“I don’t think it was Mulciber,” she says eventually, sounding tired.

James takes that in, nods, ignores the nauseas feeling he has about this whole thing. “Okay,” he says simply.

She drops her hands, turning to look at him, still lying down. “See? Unreliable.”

James decides to ignore that. “You said you remember other Slytherins hanging around in the hall?”

She nods. “I don’t think it was them either.”

“Who do you think it was?”

There’s a long pause before she shakes her head. “I don’t know. I don’t know anything. I have fucking brain damage or something.”

“You could go a little easier on yourself here Mary,” because she could.

Mary only laughs. "They're going to get away with it," she mutters bitterly. "Because they're boys. Because they're rich. Because my head is broken and I can't get my story straight. They're going to get away with it and it makes me so angry because something—" her voice cracks for the first time, wobbling out of her mouth. She lets out a frustrated exhale, blinking the moisture from her eyes.

"Something bad happened," she goes on, voice small. "Something really fucking bad happened and I can feel it in my chest and under my nails and behind my teeth and I must have taken a hundred showers since I woke up in that fucking hospital bed but I can't seem to wash it off."

James reaches out, squeezing her arm. "You're remembering things, it's coming back, just like Pomfrey said it would. Give it a few days, a week, see if your memory clears."

James can feel her shake under his hand. He can't imagine how she feels. How much this hurts. He tries but he can't.

"I don't know if I can stand it," she whispers finally, eyes squeezing shut.

James swallows around the lump in his throat. "They're not going to get away with it," he says, voice nearly as quiet as her's. "I promise."

The silence stretches on for a long time before her mouth flicks up at the corner, eyes still closed. "Of course you do," it comes out sounding overfond. "Bloody Gryffindor poster boy."

He watches the map. Doesn't sleep. Watches the map some more. Doesn't sleep. Watches Regulus walk to and from class with his friends. Watches him spend as little time in the common room as possible and as much time in his dorm as he can. Doesn't sleep. Watches him avoid the library. The Quidditch pitch. Anywhere else James could reasonably run into him. Talk to him. Doesn't sleep.

Sometimes he gets angry. Breaks an inkwell by accident when he's throwing things around too aggressively. Very much on purpose destroys one of his textbooks by chucking it at the wall. Shoves the map roughly into his bedside table and swears not to look at it again. Swears that he doesn't care. If Regulus wants to sulk or freeze him out or do whatever the hell bullshit thing he's doing then he can. James is tired. He's so fucking tired and he doesn't care, so there.

Except he does care.

Cares a pathetic all consuming amount.

Except he always takes the map out again. Follows the same name around the castle. Wonders what he did. Wonders what Regulus is thinking.

Doesn't sleep.

Doesn't sleep.

Doesn't sleep.

And then. It happens.

He sees Regulus alone, for the first time in days, and he practically sprints out of the dorm. Doesn't answer Remus or Peter when they ask where he's going. Doesn't stop to grab the invisibility cloak.

It's just after supper, eight o'clock, almost curfew. The sun through the castle windows is orange and pink and setting the sky on fire as it drips towards the horizon. James jogs to the random corridor on the third floor, hopes Regulus is still there, hopes he hasn't gone too far.

He's almost given up when he finds him, standing in front of one of the windows. James stutters to a stop, somehow, through the anger and fear and ache, he feels his breath catch.

Fuck,

He thinks inelegantly.

He's so beautiful.

For a moment James can't move, can't bring himself to ruin the picture in front of him.

He's so beautiful,

His thoughts ramble on.

I love him so much.

James really is screwed here, the sudden realization hitting him like a Bludger to the chest. Because he doesn't know what he's going to do if Regulus is finished with him. Doesn't know how he's going to get over this. It's a cliché, the teenager thinking they're in love. Something his parents would laugh about. Call cute and pinch his cheeks.

But this doesn't feel cute.

This feels like the person he wants most in the world has been avoiding him for days.

And he can't sleep.

And he can't think.

And looking at him hurts.

Loving him hurts.

"Regulus?"

His head snaps in James's direction so quickly it's almost startling, hand going predictably to his wand before he recognizes James and then his eyes scan the space around them. Always hiding. Always so afraid of being seen.

“We shouldn’t—“

“You’re avoiding me,” James steps closer, watching as Regulus barely suppresses a wince. He doesn’t answer, just turns his head, looking down at the ground.

It hurts.

It hurts.

It hurts.

“What did I do?” he hates how weak it sounds but he doesn’t take it back. “I need you to tell me what I did.”

Regulus scoffs. “You didn’t do anything.”

“Then what happened?” another step closer, Regulus still not looking at him.

“James,” it’s said in a condescending tone, like he’s missing something obvious.

Everything feels a little fuzzy, his pulse beating too fast, fear clawing at his ribs. “Are you ending this?” He doesn’t manage to keep his voice level. Doesn’t manage to keep the pain out of it.

Regulus doesn’t even try to hide the flinch this time. Doesn’t try to answer either. Just stands there. The silence making James’s skin feel too tight.

He really needs to sleep.

“Reg?” his voice scratches and cracks.

Regulus won’t look at him. Still doesn’t answer. It feels like one of his nightmares. He knows it isn’t. He digs his nails into his palms so he can feel the sting. Counts the fingers on his hands. He knows this isn’t a nightmare. But Regulus won’t look at him. Won’t speak.

He bends over, grabbing his knees, trying to breathe. Trying not to be sick.

He really needs to sleep.

“James?”

Regulus sounds far away, James still trying to keep his dinner down. He hears the sound of footsteps but he doesn’t raise his head.

“Merlin James, are you okay?”

He shakes his head, and when he speaks his voice is breathless. “Are you ending this?”

He needs to know.

He just needs to know.

Regulus makes a noise—James doesn't know what it means—frustration maybe? And then there's a hand in his hair, on his face, his shoulders, forcing him upright.

"I wanna be enough," James says pathetically, barely able to meet Regulus's eyes. "I wanna be enough."

"Christ James," Regulus mutters, holding his face between his hands like he's forgotten they're still in the middle of the hallway. His eyes big and grey and full of regret.

"I didn't mean it."

"You did."

Regulus shakes his head. "You're enough, you're more than enough, you're so much more than I deserve. That's the problem, can't you see it?" his thumbs stroke James's cheeks.

"Where have you been Reg?" he asks weakly.

Regulus's usually schooled expression cracks. "I'm just trying to do the right thing," he whispers, which makes no sense to James at all.

"The right thing?" James repeats back.

"I—"

"Mr. Black."

Regulus jumps back, hands dropping from James's face as he whips around, McGonagall walking towards them down the hall. James watches the colour drain from Regulus's face and he wants to reach out and steady him but he knows that would only make it worse.

"Professor?" Regulus finally manages to get out, voice so tight it hurts.

To McGonagall's credit she only gives James a brief glance, like finding the pair of them embracing in the middle of the hallway is completely normal.

"The headmaster would like to see you in his office."

Regulus visibly stiffens.

"What?" the word comes out of James's mouth before he can stop himself. "Why?"

McGonagall arches her brow in his direction but doesn't dignify that question with an answer.

When Regulus speaks next his voice is flat. James has heard that tone before. Knows that it means Reg is scared. "Of course, Professor," he doesn't look back at James, just starts walking, like they weren't in the middle of—

"Mr. Potter, I believe it is almost curfew, perhaps you'd better head back to your dormitory."

James blinks, tearing his eyes away from Regulus's shrinking back, barely resisting the urge to go after him.

"What's happened?" he asks, earning him a rather exasperated sigh.

"Surely you must know that I can't disclose that information to you?"

James swallows with difficulty. "Is he in trouble? Has something happened with his family?"

"Mr. Potter—"

"Can't I wait for him?" he says desperately. "It's—I'll just wait outside, I swear. I just don't want him to be—we're supposed to be in pairs right? If we have to go somewhere after curfew? So I can just—"

"James."

His mouth shuts at the use of his first name, all further protests dying on his tongue. McGonagall gives him an appraising look over the top of her glasses. He's not sure what she sees but when she speaks again her voice is softer than he expects it to be.

"I will make sure that Mr. Black gets safely back to his dormitory," she says calmly. "But right now I need you to go to yours," and when James still doesn't move. "That wasn't a suggestion."

His hands are shaking, Regulus now gone, disappeared around the corner at the end of the hall. It's painful, swallowing his questions. His fear. His indignation. Painful nodding his head and turning back in the opposite direction.

He feels useless. Helpless. All the things he keeps trying to convince Regulus that he isn't. It burns the inside of his skin.

I'm here Reg. I'm here.

I'm here Reg.

I'm here.

I'm here.

I'm—

Chapter End Notes

Hello beautiful people!

I really liked the idea of developing the James/Mary friendship so hopefully you guys liked it too!

Also shout-out to Sirius Black for providing the only comic relief in this whole chapter.

Thank you thank you thank you for the comments and kudos!

Chapter 28

Chapter Summary

Dumbledore is not a great guy. Thanks for coming to my TED Talk.

Chapter Notes

TW: referenced / implied sexual assault

****French translation in the end notes!****

ALSO: I feel like I've said this before but Reg is not a reliable narrator. Just because he as a character doesn't really see the difference between the Death Eaters and the Order doesn't mean I'm arguing that there isn't a difference, like there is. There very much is. Very important difference. They are not equally in the wrong just because Dumbledore is a dick. This is not a Death Eater apologist fic. Just wanna make sure that's clear.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

He's not sure if it makes him feel better or worse that when the doors to the Headmaster's office open, Regulus finds himself faced with Snape, Mulciber and Avery. Better, he decides, even though his steps falter for half a heartbeat. If he's going to be royal fucked over he fully intends to take them all down with him.

"Mr. Black," Dumbledore is standing with his back to Regulus, feeding something that might be fish to a rather intimidating looking phoenix. "I'm glad you could join us," as though he had a choice. "Please, take a seat."

He doesn't speak, taking the only free chair available in front of the headmaster's desk. He can feel the other three boys watching him the whole time, but he doesn't look back until he's seated, and even then only briefly. Only long enough to catch the smug look on Snape's face.

This is not going to be going well for him then.

"I expect your aware that Mary Macdonald was attacked a week ago?" Dumbledore finally turns around, face soft, almost smiling. Regulus has never particularly liked holding his gaze.

He nods and then, when it feels like Dumbledore is waiting for more; "Yes sir, I'm aware."

"Ms. Macdonald believes that these three boys were the ones to attack her," he waves almost casually at the group of Slytherins beside Regulus. "But they claim to have been in their

dorm room and alas, their spell histories do not appear to match Mary's testimony."

It is work for Regulus not to react to that, because there is no way that Barty cast all those Imperius's. He doubts Mulciber or Avery have the capability for that kind of advance magic so it must of been Snape. Which means that he either wiped his wand or Barty was stupid enough to let him cast using his. Which Regulus is loathed to admit, is a possibility.

"It is our belief," Dumbledore goes on. "That Mary Macdonald has had her memory tampered with."

Once again, Regulus suppresses his reaction. Staring blankly back at Dumbledore, waiting for more. But no more comes. The room is submerged in silence, the only noise that of Avery fidgeting in the seat next to him.

Eventually Regulus clears his throat. "I'm sorry professor, but what does this have to do with me?"

Dumbledore smiles mildly at him. "Mr. Snape claims that you were rather upset about the way that Mary Macdonald spoke to your friend in the corridor that day. That he saw you hovering around the Gryffindor common room after supper."

Regulus resists the urge to roll his eyes. "I see," he says coldly, the kind expression remaining on Dumbledore's face.

"Your roommates claim you were out that evening, though they couldn't tell me where."

Oh.

That isn't good.

He knows they probably thought they were doing him a favour, keeping him away from the scene of the crime. Not realizing they were robbing him of an alibi. Not realizing that he needed one.

"So tell me, Mr. Black, where were you, the night of Mary Macdonald's attack?"

Regulus almost laughs.

He can't tell him of course, doesn't trust him, certainly doesn't trust Avery or Mulciber or Snape. Snape who somehow knew that Regulus wouldn't be able to answer this question, which makes something uneasy crawl into the pit of his stomach.

He can't tell them that he'd spent that night cuddling Jame bloody Potter.

"I was in the astronomy tower," he hears himself say. Avery snorts.

"The astronomy tower?" Dumbledore repeats, eyebrow raised. "Any reason in particular?"

Regulus grits his teeth. "Stargazing."

Dumbledore makes an “ah” shape with his mouth. “Alone?”

“Alone.”

“I see. Well, in that case, may I have your wand?”

Regulus blinks back at him. “Sir?”

“Just as a way to clear your name, confirm that you had nothing to do with this.”

Regulus doesn’t know what Snape and his band of baboons did to keep their wands clean, but he knows that he hasn’t done anything. Meaning that his Legilimens is going to show right up.

“No.”

Dumbledore arches his brow. “No?”

“With all due respect sir,” Regulus goes on with all the spoiled brat indignation he can muster. “In order to check a minor’s wand you require the permission of their parent or guardian or a warrant from the Ministry.”

“What?!” Mulciber squawks indignantly. And out of the corner of his eye Regulus thinks he sees Snape frown as well. Apparently they were unaware of that rule. It’s a small victory, not enough to get Regulus off the hook, but enough to buy him time at least.

Dumbledore has gone silent again, eyes unwaveringly on Regulus. He wonders if this usually works for him—if he just waits students out, until they can’t take the pressure anymore. If so, he’ll be sorely disappointed. Regulus has spent far too much time in Walburga’s house to be intimidated by a staring contest. Even if it is with Albus Dumbledore.

Eventually, the older man smiles, sending a chill down Regulus’s spine. “Mr. Snape, Avery, Mulciber, you’re free to return to your dormitory.”

Regulus isn’t proud of the spike of fear that shoots through his chest right then. Not that he trusted any of them to have his back, but the idea of being left alone in this office makes him nervous.

As the other boys shuffle out of their seats and towards the door he tries to focus on the feel of his wand against his skin, as though he would stand any chance against Albus Dumbledore. Still. It helps knowing it’s there.

Eventually, the door closes, and they’re alone.

Something isn’t quite right about this—the timing, the lack of parents, Dumbledore sending the others away. It makes Regulus’s skin itch.

“I was wondering,” Dumbledore goes on mildly. “If your answer might change now that we’re alone?”

Regulus stares back at him flatly, even though he can feel his pulse beating out of the side of his neck. “Just to clarify,” his tone sounds especially posh, “those three have all been identified by the victim, but I’m the one you’re questioning?”

Dumbledore’s eyes twinkle. “They all have alibis.”

“Yes. Each other. You don’t find that suspicious?”

Dumbledore holds his gaze and then, after an extended silence, shrugs. “Perhaps, but I’d still like to know where you were that night, and why you’re so reluctant to hand over your wand?”

“I told you where I was,” Regulus replies, stubbornly ignoring the second question.

“In the astronomy tower, stargazing?”

Regulus grits his teeth, hands curling around the arms of his chair. He doesn’t want to be here. He feels trapped. He feels small.

“Yes,” he grinds out.

“But no one can confirm that?”

“No.”

“While Mr. Snape can confirm that you were angry at Ms. Macdonald, and waiting around her dormitory?”

It’s the look in his eyes that makes it sink in. That makes Regulus realize what’s really going on. Realize that Dumbledore wants him to be guilty.

“Snape can confirm,” he repeats, trying to keep his voice steady, “Snape who has been accused of being involved in the attack. Do you not think that gives him an ulterior motive here?”

Another long pause. Another shrug.

“I have to tell you, these allegation are quite serious,” the older man goes on.

None of this is right. Regulus knows that. Eyes bouncing around the dark office, looking for what he doesn’t know, but suddenly feeling surrounded.

“This isn’t about Mary Macdonald, is it?” he finds himself saying, eyes returning to Dumbledore’s eerily calm face. “This is about the war.”

Dumbledore smiles. It doesn’t feel friendly. “Are you aware of what your parents have been up to recently?”

“No,” he’s not even sure if it’s a lie.

Dumbledore leans forward across his desk, not aggressively, but their increased proximity does little to quell Regulus's growing anxiety. "I don't believe that. Just like I don't believe that you were in the astronomy tower the night Mary Macdonald was attacked."

"I had nothing to do with that."

"I'm afraid it's looking more and more like you can't prove it."

Okay,

Reg tries to steady himself.

Okay. There has to be a way out of this.

Think.

You're clever. You can do this.

Just think.

"Are you threatening to expel me? Is that it?" he is proud that his voice doesn't shake as badly as his hands have started to.

"For an unforgivable? A violent attack on a student? Expulsion is the least of your worries Mr. Black. The Ministry has already expressed their desire to be involved. They're desperate for the chance to punish someone after the attacks last year and over the summer. They want someone to make an example of."

Regulus swallows with difficulty but refuses to be intimidated. He has friends at the Ministry. Or—well—he has whatever Lucius and Roldolphus are. Has his father's old colleagues. They'll help him won't they?

"I was under the impression you didn't have much pull at the Ministry these days," is the closest he'll come to saying any of that out loud.

Something dark flashes in Dumbledore's blue eyes but when he speaks his tone remains light. "I have enough. I assure you."

Regulus doesn't know if that's true. He worries it might be.

"What do you want from me?" he feels hopelessly outgunned. He should have seen this coming, he should have known he couldn't just come back to school with the Dark Mark on his arm and pretend like he was just any other student. Dumbledore isn't just his headmaster anymore. He's an advisory.

"I want you to keep me informed on the actions of your parents, who they see, where they go, what they get up to," he opens his hands in a placating gesture. "I'm afraid we've rather fallen out of touch."

Regulus's nails are digging into his chair, trying to get a hold of his swirling thoughts. Strangely, he feels bad, though not for himself. For James. Because he knows that James would never believe Dumbledore to be capable of such a dirty play. Regulus is less surprised.

"You want me to be—what—a spy?"

His eyes dance in the firelight. "If you'd like."

A bitter laugh leaves Regulus's mouth. "Mary Macdonald know you're using her attack as a bargaining chip?"

"Come now Regulus," he almost flinches at the sound of his name coming out of Dumbledore's mouth. Somehow he manages to make it sound like a threat. "Let's not pretend that you care about Mary Macdonald."

Regulus glares back at him.

No,

he thinks.

Let's not.

"I am giving you an opportunity here," the old man goes on, as though it's as simple as that. "Will you work with me?"

Me.

Not us.

Not "the greater good."

Me.

"No," the word is out of his mouth before he's even really thought it through. He should probably be more strategic about this. It's an opportunity to switch sides, not something he'd ever thought he would have. But he doesn't like being bullied. Doesn't trust Dumbledore to keep him safe. To give a shit about him when things inevitably get messy and dangerous.

Dumbledore arches his brow. "Are you sure?"

"Yes. Can I go now?" his voice is sharp, his whole body trembling.

After a long look, Dumbledore nods. "I'm sure we'll be seeing one another again soon."

Regulus doesn't bother responding, too anxious to get out of that office, hating that in order to do it he has to turn his back on the old man. It's not until he's in the stairwell that he realizes how badly he's sweating.

Fuck.

He hopes it's a bluff, that Dumbledore wouldn't really go through the hassle of trying to pin Macdonald's attack on him. Of trying to turn it into some big deal.

He hopes.

Fuck.

He nearly jumps out of his skin when he steps into the corridor outside the Headmaster's office and feels fingers wrap around his wrist. Disembodied fingers.

"Jesus Christ Ja—"

"Shh," the half-invisible boy hisses, and Regulus is just shaken enough that he doesn't argue. "Snape is waiting for you around the corner," James whispers.

Regulus looks up ahead as if he'd be able to see him.

Great. An ambush. That's just what he needs right now.

James lifts his arm, revealing himself more fully, and beckoning for Regulus to join him. The younger boy gives him a skeptical look.

"We're not going to fit."

"I'll crouch."

Regulus rolls his eyes but doesn't argue further. Doesn't have the energy. James does crouch, practically folding himself around Regulus as the move down the hallway under the invisibility cloak, breath hot on the back of Regulus's neck, arms warm over his shoulders.

Snape is, of course, waiting around the corner, leaning against the wall, wand twirling between his fingers. Maybe Regulus had underestimated Snape's friendship with Mulciber. He'd been pretty confident that Snape would let his goon take the fall for them. Apparently he'd made a mistake.

James nudges him around the next corner and Regulus doesn't need to ask where he's leading them, though part of him wants to protest. He's not sure he can deal with James right now. Not sure he knows where James falls in all this. Especially when there's the possibility that McGonagall knows about them. A possibility she might tell Dumbledore, give him something else to use against Regulus.

The minute they cross the threshold of the Come and Go Room Regulus pulls away from James—away from his touch and his heat and his smell and all the rest of it. All the things that cloud his judgement. Make him weak. He's still shaking, he realizes, and he prays that somehow James didn't notice.

"Reg?" the other boy asks eventually.

And of all the things Regulus should say: go away. Leave me alone. I don't want you here.

“You came back?” is what comes out of his mouth.

“Of course.”

Of course. As if he would ever do anything else. James Potter always comes back. So fucking sweet he makes Regulus’s teeth ache. He wants to hate it. It’d be so much easier if he could hate it.

Regulus is thrumming his fingers on the back of the couch, staring at the far wall, trying to figure out what he should do. He could write to his mother, to Narcissa, to Bellatrix. For once in his life they might actually be of help. Though he isn’t at all confident that Dumbledore won’t check his mail, or that he’ll like the help his family wants to give him.

“Reg?” James says again, sounding closer. “What’s happened?”

And then there’s this.

James.

James bloody Potter.

The boy he’s been trying so desperately to distance himself from. For both their sakes. Regulus isn’t sure he can stand watching James fall out of love with him, and he’d been certain that he’d started. That James was growing tired of him. Until today when James tracked him down practically in tears, begging to be enough. Which was heartbreaking and confusing and dangerous all rolled into one.

Regulus squeezes his eyes shut.

He doesn’t want to hurt James.

But it’s inevitable at this point.

No matter what he does.

He hears footsteps and when he opens his eyes again James is facing him, full of concern. Regulus reaches out, as weak as always, reaches out and grabs James’s wrists, his waist, his shoulders. Like he’s building him with his hands, confirming that he’s there and real and something that Regulus can have if he wants.

Because he does doesn’t he?

Want him?

Love him?

Hate him?

A huff of laughter forces its way out of his struggling lungs. He doesn’t think it’s ever like this in the stories. Love. The prince and the princess stand next to one another and there’s no

question that they belong together. That it's right. That it will make them happy. All Regulus has is questions. All Regulus has is the deep feeling of wrongness in his stomach every time James looks at him like he's important.

"Regulus," James says softly—sweetly. He grabs Regulus's wrists, stilling his hands where they are, cradling James's face.

He needs to learn not to give everything away, Regulus thinks as he stares up into the older boy's eyes, which are all feeling. All heart. James Potter walks through life without any armour on and one of these days it's going to get him killed. Just the thought sends a shiver through Regulus's body.

"You came back," he croaks again, which is still not what he wants to say and he doesn't know why that keeps happening. All he knows is that he's been ignoring James for days and then the first time they speak he gets dragged to the Headmaster's office and still, for some reason, James is here. Here waiting for him. Even though Regulus has shown him in every way that he doesn't deserve it.

"I told you I would," James gives his wrists a light squeeze.

"I know," he doesn't know how to explain to James that he never takes anyone at their word. Doesn't know how to.

They just keep standing there, holding one another, looking at one another. Regulus focuses on James's face instead of everything else going on inside him. There are finger smudges on his glasses—there always are—flecks of gold in his eyes, barely there freckles on the bridge of his slightly crooked nose. Regulus has the sudden urge to be able to paint the Muggle way—he wants to stare at this face for hours, for days, for weeks. Wants to figure out what shade of pink his lips are, wants to draw his smile just right, commit his dimples to memory. He wants to take his time. Wants to make James Potter his life's work.

A stupid useless fantasy.

Eventually James sighs, pulling Regulus's hands gently from his face but not letting go of his wrists, tugging Regulus towards the couch. When they're sitting James turns to him, expectantly.

"I can do this all night you know, it's not like I'm gonna get any sleep anyway," James says it with a half-hearted smile but Regulus suddenly notices the heavy bags under James's eyes which are slightly bloodshot, his hair more of a disaster than usual.

"You're not sleeping?" he finds himself asking.

James waves his hand dismissively. "It's not important right now," James gives him a serious look. "What did Dumbledore want and what does it have to do with Snape?"

Regulus looks back, considers lying, finds he doesn't have the energy. He's not sure he can see the point.

“Mary Macdonald’s attack,” Regulus says, causing James to stiffen. “Snape, Avery and Mulciber are saying it was me.”

“They’re WHAT.”

James’s indignation is almost flattering, unfortunately it’s followed by a swelling of guilt in Regulus’s stomach. Because he hadn’t attacked Mary Macdonald. But he had covered it up. Was still covering it up.

He pushes on, “And since I don’t have an alibi Dumbledore is willing to believe them,” he leaves out the politics. Afraid to hear what James would say about Dumbledore’s proposed deal. Afraid that he’d take the old man’s side.

“You don’t have—” he sees the moment it clicks for James. “Me,” he says suddenly. “I’m your alibi?”

“Technically.”

Regulus barely has time to blink before James is off the couch and heading for the door.

“Where are you going?” Regulus demands, quickly getting up to follow.

“To Dumbledore. I’m gonna tell him you have an alibi.”

Regulus feels his heart stop.

“You can’t do that,” James is too far ahead, hand already on the door. Regulus whips out his wand. “Protego!” he shouts, which somehow works because James is thrown backwards, stumbling until he trips onto his ass.

“Shit—what the hell Reg?” he looks up at him indignantly.

“You can’t tell Dumbledore about us.”

“Why the hell not? They’re accusing you of having used a goddamn unforgivable! Of assaulting someone!” James looks at him like hearing it out loud will change Regulus’s mind.

It doesn’t.

“Would you really rather be a rapist than gay?”

That takes Regulus back. “A rapist?” he repeats.

James’s eyes go wide, like he’s only just realizing what he’s said.

“Is Macdonald saying she was raped?”

His thoughts start firing off in a dozen different directions. Nonsensically he thinks that that isn’t right, because he stopped Barty didn’t he? He thought he’d stopped him? And then, perhaps more troubling, he moves on to the fact that Mary Macdonald shouldn’t have those

memories at all, he got rid of everything that was there. Everything that wasn't dark. Something cold drips down his spine. Were the blindspots not permanent? Are those moments becoming clear for her?

“Regulus?”

At some point during Regulus's spiral James managed to get himself back on his feet.

“I'm sorry I shouldn't have just thrown that at you, not when...”

Regulus blinks, the room around him coming back into focus. “Not when?”

James looks back at him, like he can't figure out if Regulus's question is rhetorical or not, after a few minutes he shakes his head. “Nothing. Never mind.”

Regulus barely pays him any attention, mind still reeling over all the memories that might be bouncing around in Mary Macdonald's head. He should have been more careful—more thorough. He shouldn't have made assumptions about things he barely understands.

Fuck,

he thinks.

Fuck.

He can't figure out what Dumbledore's next move will be, or Macdonald's, or Snape's. He feels like he's playing blind. He should probably write to his mother. He doesn't want to, but he's not sure he has any other options.

“Reg, hey?”

Regulus's eyes snap up, meeting James's.

“Let me do this okay?” he says quietly. “Let me do this for you.”

He doesn't even know what he's asking.

“No.”

James lets out a frustrated sigh. “It's not like Dumbledore is going to go around the school gossiping about our sex life.”

“Snape would,” and he would know, if Regulus was suddenly let off the hook that wormy little bastard would make it his mission to find out why. He's already suspicious of them.

James is opening his mouth to protest—maybe volunteering to scare some discretion into Snape—but Regulus cuts him off;

“That's besides the point. I really don't give a shit what anyone at this school thinks.”

James looks surprised by that. “Oh. But—“

“My family can’t know.”

There’s a pause. “That you’re gay?”

Regulus snorts. “I’m not gay.”

“You sound like Sirius.”

He supposes he deserves that, though he still feels the intense desire to punch James for saying it.

“I’m slightly more self-aware than Sirius I imagine,” he says flatly. “I’m—I’m attracted to boys. Always have been. But I don’t have the privilege of being gay.”

James really does look lost. “Is this a riddle?” he asks, squinting at Regulus like that will make his words clearer.

“Sort of,” Regulus answers truthfully. “I’m the heir now. Who I want to be with is irrelevant. I have to marry a woman and continue the line,” he feels tired even just talking about it. “There is a long tradition of Black’s fooling around on the side, as long as you’re discreet about it and do your duty it’s tolerated.”

You would think, being a pureblood himself, that none of this would come as a surprise to James. But then, the Potter’s are a very different kind of family. They always have been.

James exhales, running a hand through his hair. “Okay, listen, we’ll come back to how absolutely fucking miserable that sounds, but for right now, I still don’t see the problem. I’m just telling Dumbledore.”

Just.

Regulus almost laughs.

Just telling the man who threatened me with Azakaban the most vulnerable thing about me.

“It’ll get out.”

“You don’t know that,” James argues, because of course he does.

“No, but it isn’t worth the risk.”

James looks ready to pull his hair out. “Not worth the risk? I think the stakes here are a little higher than messing up your future unhappy marriage prospects don’t you?”

Regulus shakes his head, hating that he’s wasting his time on this conversation when what he really needs to be doing is strategizing.

“Marriage is important to my family.”

James growls. “I get that but—“

“No,” Regulus cuts him off. “You don’t. Marriage is important to my family. Take a moment James, please, and remember who we’re talking about. Try to imagine what disappointment looks like in my house. With my parents.”

And he does. He stands there looking at Regulus and he thinks. Just for a second. Just long enough for the blood to drain from his face.

“Reg—“

“If it was just me that it would blow back on then maybe—I don’t know—maybe it would be worth it. But they won’t just be finding out about my...proclivities. They’ll find out who I’ve been...they’ll know about you,” he finally manages to say, his next exhale shaky. “Whatever they think of me, they still need me around, but you James?” he shakes his head, unwilling to name all the possibilities. All the nightmare inducing possibilities.

“So you can’t tell Dumbledore,” he pushes on. “You can’t tell anyone. This goes so far beyond sex. Do you understand?”

He does. Regulus knows he does. Can see it in his eyes. But James Potter doesn’t lay down his sword and bow out gracefully. He fights to the bitter, dirty end. He drags himself through the mud and blood until he has nothing left. And then he fights a little more. He doesn’t want to admit Regulus is right. He doesn’t want to sit back and watch injustice be done. Ever the Gryffindor.

Maybe you should tell him,

hisses the voice in Regulus’s head.

Tell him you aren’t so innocent.

He probably should. He won’t. But he should.

Eventually James sighs, leaning against the back of the couch. “If I tell Dumbledore,” Regulus barely manages to hold back a groan, “that I was with you that night, that you couldn’t have done it, but that no one can know, he’ll understand. He’ll keep our secret,” James winces on the last word. Regulus isn’t sure why it feels so violent. But it always does.

“I know,” Regulus starts and stops, not sure how to phrase this; “I know you believe that—“

“Reg—“

“—but Dumbledore has no interest in protecting me. I’m sorry. I’m sorry it’s me you’ve ended up with—anyone else and I’m sure you’d be right. But me and Dumbledore are...not on the same side.”

He sees that drive into James like a steel blade. The words that aren’t being said. That if Regulus isn’t on Dumbledore’s side he isn’t on James’s either. And he waits for the other boy to make that case. But after a few seconds James wipes a hand down his face.

“You don’t trust Dumbledore.”

It isn't a question.

Regulus answers anyway.

"No."

He'll use you against me, he almost says, but doesn't.

After a moment of silence James turns to him, shoulders sagging. "So what's the plan then Reg? What are we going to do?"

We.

He said we.

Like any of this is his problem.

"I'm going to write to my mother," because he can't bear to lie. He hates lying to James and he already does too much of it.

James makes a disgusted face, looking about as happy about this decision as Regulus is. "I can't quite picture a world where Walburga is the answer to anyone's problems."

Regulus isn't sure if he laughs or groans. "No," he says wearily, moving to stand next to James against the couch, their arms brushing. "Me either really."

After a few seconds he leans his head on James's shoulder, and James wraps his arm around his waist, pulling him in closer. Regulus closes his eyes, greedy. Always so greedy for this.

"Regulus?" James says quietly, face turned into his hair.

"Mm."

"You can't do that again, okay?"

Regulus's eyes blink open. "Do what?"

"Disappear. You need space you tell me, you talk to me, but you can't just walk away like that," there's a pause and then; "If you're gonna break my heart you need to mean it."

Regulus hates those last few words. Hates how real they are. How they sound wrapped up in James's voice. He squeezes his eyes shut, pushing further into James.

"I don't want to break any part of you," Regulus whispers, painfully vulnerable. It helps to have his eyes closed.

James kisses the top of his head. "I love you."

"Je suis désolé de t'avoir fait ça," the words come tumbling out of him, always so much easier when he knows James can't understand. "Je suis désolé de ne pas être assez fort pour

te protéger. Je pense que tu pourrais me détester pour ça un jour. Mais j'espère que non. Mon Dieu, j'espère vraiment que non.”

James Squeezes him tighter. “Reg?” he says in a low voice, breath tickling the top of Regulus’s ear, but he only shakes his head.

“I love you,” he says instead. “I love you too.”

Over the years Regulus has, in passing, spoken to Mary Macdonald. Never for any great length of time or about anything important, but they’re only a year apart, in the same school, on opposing Quidditch teams. It happens. But neither of them has ever sought the other out, and he is more than certain they have never spoken alone.

Despite all that, when he walks out of Transfiguration and sees her leaning against the wall across from his classroom, he knows that she’s there for him. He considers, for one pathetic second, running away. He doesn’t. But it’s a near thing.

“Hello,” he says, stopping in front of her, she holds his gaze unabashedly.

A moment passes before she cocks her head to the side, “over here,” and then starts walking.

Once again Regulus feels the strong urge to turn in the opposite direction and run for it. Instead he follows Mary down the hall, letting her stay a step or two ahead of him until she turns into, what appears to be, an empty classroom. Once he’s inside she flicks her wand, slamming the door shut behind them before she jumps up onto the teacher’s desk at the front of the class. If she’s nervous she doesn’t show it. Though she does look tired. A little paler than she was a few weeks ago, eyes a dimmer, though no less intimidating.

After a moment of tense silence Regulus speaks. “What’d he say?” because the only reason that Mary Macdonald would suddenly be hunting him down is because James had gone done something stupid. Well intentioned. But stupid.

Mary smirks and he wonders if that’s a good sign. “He did try to be subtle.”

Regulus resists the urge to roll his eyes. “I’m sure.”

“Tell me,” her eyes give him a once over that leaves him distinctly uncomfortable. “How is it that you have James Potter doing your dirty work for you?”

He grimaces. “I don’t. For this exact reason.”

“Yes, alright, but you knew it was him that lead me to you?”

Fuck.

Maybe James wasn’t the only one failing at subtlety here.

“He was asking me questions the other day. I think my brother has prejudiced him against me,” Regulus is careful to keep his voice as neutral as possible. “No doubt they would both happily blame me for every shitty thing that happens at this school.”

It’s what he would have said a year ago. He tries to drag up that old bitterness.

Mary arches her brow. “Yeah, I don’t think so though. Because that isn’t how you said it, it isn’t how he asked it. Your tone is all off.” She waves her hand at him.

“My tone?” he repeats skeptically.

“Mhm,” she places her hands on the edge of her desk and leans forward. “So tell me Reggie Black, when did you and James Potter become friends and why the hell does he want me to tell Dumbledore that I didn’t see you the night I was attacked?”

It really is rather brave of her, when you think about it, to lock herself in a room with someone who might have actively tried to hurt her. Who might try to again. But then, maybe that’s what she’s hoping for—a fight—Gryffindors, they’re all idiots.

“I thought you said he tried to be subtle?” Regulus says, instead of addressing any of the other numerous points she brought up.

She smiles again. “Where James is concerned, anything less than skywriting is subtle.”

Regulus groans internally. “I suppose that’s fair.”

“So?”

“So?” Regulus repeats back at her, a bit more childishly than he would like to admit.

“James seems to think that I can help you, and maybe I can, but not until you start explaining this situation to me.”

He isn’t actually sure that Mary can help him, though he supposes it’s not the worst idea. Having the victim insist you aren’t guilty can’t hurt.

“What situation?” he asks, because he has no intention of revealing anymore to her than she already knows.

She considers him for a minute, legs swinging so that the backs of her heels are banging irritatingly into the desk she’s sitting on. Regulus doesn’t see why she has to sit on the desk at all when there’s a classroom full of empty chairs surrounding them.

“Let’s start with James.”

Oh goodie.

“What about him?”

She rolls her eyes. "You two. You're...friends? Or what? Because the last time I checked you and your brother were not on good terms and James and Sirius are practically attached at the hip so...? What gives?"

The only thing that stings more than knowing that James will never be his, is knowing that he will always be Sirius's. A fact he's reminded of in this school almost daily. It's so like his brother to become some sort of minor celebrity. All anyone ever wants to talk about are the Marauders.

"Potter has a saviour complex, decided it was his Gryffindor duty to show me the error of my ways, bring me over to the side of light etcetera, etcetera," he says flatly. "I've told him to bugger off, but he's persistent."

He thinks that's believable, maybe even a little too close to the truth. He does his best not to squirm under Mary's gaze.

"And why does Dumbledore think you attacked me?" she asks finally and Regulus has to stop himself from letting out a sigh of relief at the change in topic.

"Snape," he says, maybe a bit too quickly. "Not a fan of this thing being pinned on his mate so he's trying to blame it on me instead."

"This thing," Mary repeats, and it's only when he hears it back in her slightly hollow voice that he realizes how insensitive that was.

"Sorry," though he doesn't think he sounds very sincere. His voice never does the right things. "That was crude of me."

Mary waves him off. "If you weren't there surely you can prove it?" her tone is light but her eyes are sharp.

"I wasn't there," mostly. "And I can't prove it."

She raises her brow. "Why?"

"I wasn't in my dorm," he says through clenched teeth.

"Where were you?"

"Out."

"Where?"

"Astronomy tower."

He sees a flash of the mischief she's so known for in her eyes. "With who?"

"No one."

"No one?"

“No one,” he repeats, a little more growl in his voice.

Mary leans back on the desk. “Well that’s not very believable.”

He glares at her. “Apparently.”

She goes back to just looking at him, like she’s trying to puzzle something out. This is a bad idea—fucking James Potter, Regulus told him to stay out of it but James just can’t help himself. He always has to save the day.

“James really doesn’t think you had anything to do with it,” Mary says eventually. It isn’t phrased like a question so Regulus doesn’t supply an answer. “What I can’t figure out, is why, since you’re clearly lying.”

Regulus resents that “clearly.”

He doesn’t have an answer for her. Doesn’t want to be talking to her at all, afraid every minute that his face or his voice is going to jog some memory loose in her head. He can’t figure out if he’s a guilty man trying to get away with a crime or an innocent man wrongly accused. Neither he supposes. Somehow life never does fall neatly into either category. Everyone always some mix of both.

“Is that all?” Regulus asks, after the silence goes on too long. Mary hasn’t looked away from him once, her gaze inscrutable and far too clever for his liking.

And then.

“Oh,” she says suddenly, eyes going wide. “You were in the astronomy tower with James.”

Which technically isn’t true, but the location is really the least important part of this.

“No,” he says quickly. Probably too quickly.

“Oh,” Mary says again. Giving him a new look that makes him feel squeamish. “Well okay then.”

“Macdonald, that is NOT what happened.”

“Sure Regulus, if you say so.”

God, he really needs to never speak to another Gryffindor again, they’re all so bloody nosy and insufferable.

After fighting with himself for a few seconds, he eventually forces himself to speak. “You can’t tell anyone.”

Mary nods, strangely serious. “Yeah, I figured.”

“For James’s sake, you can’t tell anyone,” he repeats, not feeling like going through this whole conversation again but hoping his tone is enough to get his point across.

Mary nods, slowly. "Alright. For James." And then; "Whom you were with, the night I was attacked?"

Regulus lets out a heavy sigh, the annoying tug in his gut telling him that he's losing control. Too many people know. There's no way they're going to be able to keep this secret much longer. Something like fear but a little worse grips his heart.

"Yes," he finally manages to say. "Is that all?" because he really wants to get out of here and maybe murder James Potter for putting him in this position in the first place. For exposing them to someone else after everything he told him last night. And he knows he was just trying to help, to find a work around to their problem. But goddamnit James.

"I'll tell Dumbledore," for a brief moment Regulus feels his heart stop and his fear must show on his face because she quickly continues. "That I don't remember you being there that night," she shrugs. "Don't know if it'll help you, they're not listening to me much these days but..."

Regulus can't help but notice the bitterness in her voice and he thinks of Dumbledore, bargaining away her justice, using her pain to buy himself a new spy.

"I'm sorry," he finds himself saying, not sure what he's really apologizing for.

She shrugs. "It is what it is."

Regulus nods. "Okay," he says awkwardly. "Well, I'm going to go now," and when Mary makes no move to stop him he turns and heads for the door.

"You should know that I do though," she says as he reaches for the handle, causing him to look back over his shoulder, forehead wrinkled.

"Do what?" he asks.

She gives him another one of those long looks, penetrating in all the worst ways. Then she slides off the desk, walking towards him at a leisurely pace. She stops when they're right next to one another and for a moment Regulus sees something new in Mary's stare. Something violent. Like rage.

"Remember you," she says sharply, pulling the door open and leaving Regulus struggling to breathe in her wake.

Chapter End Notes

****French: I'm sorry I did this to you. I'm sorry that I'm not strong enough to protect you. I think you might hate me for this someday. But I hope not. God, I really hope not.****

Hello beautiful people!

This chapter feels short and I thought about extending it but I just like ending with a Mary Macdonald mic drop too much so here we are.

Thanks for all the nice things you write! Hope you're having a great day!

Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

tw: implied sexual assault

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

PART I: REGULUS

They're in his father's garden in Scotland, the sun is out but it isn't too hot, the grass soft underneath them. James's eyes are bright, the tops of his cheeks flushed. He laughs at something Regulus says before leaning forward and nuzzling at his neck. The affection makes Regulus squirm but he doesn't pull away, if anything he leans into it.

The air smells sweet—they picked mint that morning and the scent still lingers on their fingers, their touches. Regulus takes James's hand, holding it above himself, turning it over a few times before pressing a kiss to the inside of his palm—to each of his knuckles. James grins stupidly at him.

Overhead birds twitter and bugs hum and the rest of the world feels very, very far away. They have no one to hide from and nothing to do. Regulus breathes in deep and then exhales, before pressing another kiss to James's wrist, feeling his pulse beat against his lips.

James hums happily, eyes drifting closed. "We should stay here."

"Okay."

"Forever."

"Okay."

Regulus keeps making slow, aimless kisses along James's forearm, enjoying the way it makes his cheeks grow rosier and his lips quirk up. James is a lot like a dog—he loves to wag his tail.

"Tell me more," James says lazily.

"More?"

"Of the story. We were just getting to the good part."

Regulus snorts. "What's the good part, exactly?"

Regulus is pretty sure James opens his eyes just to roll them at him. “The part where Achilles kills Hector, obviously.

Regulus arches his brow. “I thought you liked Hector?”

“Sure, but I also like Achilles kicking ass.”

“Uh-huh,” Regulus has to bite his lip to keep from laughing, he feels a little delirious right now. Maybe it’s the sun. Maybe it’s the way that James keeps looking at him.

James taps the toe of his foot against Regulus’s heel. “Go on then.”

Regulus sighs like it’s some big inconvenience but the truth is, he loves telling stories. Always has. They’re a kind of magic. They let you be anyone, anywhere, doing anything. He’s not sure he would have survived his childhood without stories.

“As Dawn, in saffron robes, rose from the stream of Ocean, bringing light to gods and men,” Regulus starts, voice soft, drifting on the breeze. “Thetis reached the ships bearing Hephaestus’ gift. She found her beloved son groaning aloud, his arms round Patroclus’ body, while his men stood by, weeping bitterly. The shining goddess came and took his hand, saying; ‘My child you must let him go, however great your sorrow, and leave him here, dead for all time, slain by the will of heaven. Now, take up instead Hephaestus’ marvellous armour, more beautiful than any that ever adorned a man’s shoulders.’”

James scrunches up his nose, the expression so adorable that it actually takes Regulus’s breath away, sucking his next words back down his throat.

“I don’t think I could do it.”

Regulus has to get control of his breathing before he can answer. “Do what?”

“Let you go.”

His heart gives a pathetic leap. “Oh?” he has to clear his throat because his voice has grown far too sappy. “Even if I was a dead body?”

“Even then,” James says quietly.

The next thing Regulus knows James is rolling on top of him, pinning him to the grass. He hovers over Regulus, hair hanging down around his face. Always a mess. Always so lovely. “Even then,” James murmurs against his lips.

Regulus lifts himself up, just enough to take James’s mouth. Desperately. Needfully. He never has any shame when it comes to James. He feels the weight of the other boy slowly lowering on top of him. You’d think it’d be crushing but it isn’t. More like it grounds Regulus. Holds him together, in place, while his pulse races, and every nerve in his body sings.

Don’t let me go.

He thinks.

Don't let me go.

Don't let me go.

Don't let me—

“Christ Reg, get the fuck up!”

Something hits Regulus in the face causing him to shoot up, the world swimming around him.

“You're gonna be late for class Prefect,” Evan sounds somewhere between annoyed and amused, standing at the foot of Regulus's bed, doing up his shirt.

It takes another few seconds for reality to settle in. Regulus is not in a garden in Scotland. Not being smothered by James Potter. Quite the opposite in fact. He looks down at his lap.

“Did you just throw socks at my me?” he asks, a little indignantly.

Evan smirks. “Might've.”

Another, more worrying thought occurs to Regulus. “Are they clean?”

“Oh wow, look at the time, gotta go.”

“Oh fuck you,” he chucks the dirty socks at Evan's retreating back, the door swinging closed behind him as he cackles on his way down to breakfast.

Regulus sighs, bending his knees and dropping his head into his hands. Trying to settle himself. Slowly his anxieties push their way to the forefront; Dumbledore, James, Macdonald. Happiness leaches out of him like he's made of holes.

No,

he thinks pathetically.

Can't I just have it for a little longer?

He half considers going back to sleep even though he knows he can't.

Grumbling, he forces himself out of bed. Avoiding damp towels and dirty pants as he walks into the bathroom which is, of course, an absolute disaster. Thank God for house elves, they'd probably drown in their own dirty laundry without them. He finds his reflection in the bathroom mirror—hair a mess, eyes too pale to be anything but unsettling.

Little bits and pieces of his dream flicker through his head; gentle sun, fingertips, sweet lips. It fills him up with something warm—something that feels light and comforting and also aches. He sighs, gripping the edge of the counter.

It wasn't real, he has to remind himself. The last time he talked to James they'd been doing damage control not frolicking in a garden. Damage control was all they ever seemed to be doing these days. He scrubs at his face, tired of looking at it, tired of seeing his mother in his expressions. In his eyes.

His shirt sleeve slips up his arm and a quick movement draws his eye—the black tip of a slithering tail. Regulus freezes. Staring at it. He's gotten very good at avoiding his forearm. Avoiding the reality of his situation. He's worried that something has changed in him since this summer, that he's starting to lose himself a little bit. Not that he ever had a particularly firm grasp on who he was in the first place. He only ever feels sure of himself when he's with James.

It's pathetic really, the relief he feels when he tugs his sleeve back down, hiding the Mark from view. It doesn't change anything. Not really. Still, he can't help thinking the same thing he always does:

Just a little more time.

Just a little more time with him.

Please, please please.

He's not even sure who he's asking anymore. Himself? The universe? The rest of the Wizarding World? Please don't start your war yet. I'm not done being loved by him.

Regulus sighs, angry at himself for his stupidity. His weakness. He starts the shower, waiting until the water is scalding before he strips out of his pyjamas and climbs in. Hoping to wash all thoughts of gardens and forever and love off his skin.

“Alright, today is an exciting day class,” Merry-Thought claps her hands together at the front of the room, looking far too chipper for nine in the morning, at least in Regulus's opinion.

“Ooh,” Cerci buzzes excitedly beside him. Speaking of too chipper.

Regulus is folded over his desk, chin resting on his arms, potentially regretting his choice of seat partner. He'd refused to sit with Evan and Barty after the sock incident this morning, but he's not sure he can quite stomach Cerci's energy at the moment.

“Now, this is quite a complicated bit of magic but you have proven yourselves to be a very competent class so far this term so I've decided to give it a try. Can anyone tell me what a Patronus is?”

That actually does get Regulus's attention.

“Are we learning how to cast a Patronus?” he murmurs, to no one in particular, but Cerci squeaks beside him.

“Merlin this is gonna be the coolest class ever. My mum can cast a corporeal Patronus, it’s a duck.”

Regulus blinks, turning to look at her. “Your mother’s Patronus is a duck?”

Cerci does not seem to recognize how ridiculous that is. She just nods her head enthusiastically. “Yup, it’s adorable.”

Walburga can’t cast a corporeal Patronus. Honestly she might not be able to cast a Patronus at all. His dad’s is a greyhound, lean and majestic, Regulus hasn’t seen him cast it for a long time now though. It hits him that he probably never will again. That his father is too far gone at this point. He tries to remember the last time he saw his father’s Patronus but he can’t. Honestly, his memory has never been that great, always a little fuzzy and muddled. He thinks it’s because his mum and Bellatrix are always messing around in his head.

“Now I’ll ask you to all get out your wands,” Merry-Thought is saying at the front of the class, leading to a symphony of rustling bags and screeching chairs as they all get ready to perform the most interesting piece of magic they’ve been shown all year.

“This is very complex spell so I don’t want any of you to get discouraged if you aren’t able to get it today. We aren’t aiming for corporeal Patronuses on the first try, any sign of a magical shield should be considered a success, alright?” she looks around brightly at the class.

For a Professor of the Dark Arts, Merry-Thought is an incredibly bubbly person. A slightly plump, middle-aged witch, she wears bright patterned robes and huge dangling earrings. And she is always smiling. Always.

“The wand movements and incantation are relatively simple, you’ll want to make a circular motion with your wand—yes, just like that Miss Linnens, well done—the larger they get the more force you’ll be able to put behind your spell. And the incantation is: Expecto Patronum. Now, I want you to all still your wands and just repeat that after me, alright? On three: one, two, three—”

“Expecto Patronum,” the class choruses, with about as much enthusiasm as you can expect from a bunch of fifteen year olds at nine in the morning. Still, Merry-Thought is beaming.

“Very good, very, very, good. Now, for the difficult part, you’ll have to find a memory or a thought, something that makes you happy. It should be something important, something strong, not just the feeling you get when your favourite cake is being served in the Great Hall,” she looks around, getting one or two laughs. “This should be the sort of happy that feels overflowing, like it could spill out of you at any moment, okay?”

There are a few scattered nods about the class but apparently that’s all the confirmation Merry-Thought needs.

“Excellent, well, go on have at it, make sure you’re not pointing your wands at anyone!”

Regulus turns to Cerci who is practically vibrating in the chair next to him. “This. Is. So. Freaking. Cool.”

He can't help but smile at her enthusiasm. "Sure," he says. "Why don't you try first."

"Okay, okay, okay," she closes her eyes and screws up her face, Regulus watching with mild amusement.

"What are you doing?"

"Shhh," she waves her hand at him. "I'm trying to pick my happiest memory."

"Ah."

"I need to concentrate."

"Okay."

"There are just so many."

He snorts, not worried that he'll have the same problem. In fact, he's fairly certain he won't be able to conjure a Patronus at all. Lots of Wizards can't, and emotion based magic has never been his strong suit. It's why he likes potions—it's exact, clean. Certain ingredient in certain quantities under certain circumstances produce known reactions. He likes the stability of it. The reason. Old magic like this makes no sense to him.

"Okay," Cerci pulls him out of his thoughts, her eyes opening again. "I have one, lets try," she holds up her wand and Regulus quickly pushes it to the side so that it's not pointing directly at him.

"Oh right," she laughs. "Sorry."

"My face is very important to me," he says flatly.

She shoots him a grin. "I can tell."

"What's that supposed to mean?" only slightly offended.

She shrugs, mischief still bright in her eyes. "That you look like the type of person who spends a lot of time on their hair."

His hand goes protectively to his curls. "I—"

"Shhh," she hisses again, though he can tell she's trying not to laugh. "I'm about to perform some very, very impressive magic here so please prepare yourself to be amazed."

He rolls his eyes. "By all means," he gestures to the empty space in front of their desk.

She sticks her tongue between her teeth, squinting as she moves her wand. "Expecto-Patronum!"

Nothing happens.

"That was very impressive," Regulus says flatly.

Cerci snorts, giving his shoulder a shove. “Yeah, yeah, first try. Like me go again.”

So she does.

Again.

And again.

And again.

“Well, that was anti-climatic,” she sighs, sagging back in her chair and blowing her bangs off her forehead. “I’m tired,” she kicks his foot under the table. “Your turn.”

“All that nothing did look tiring,” Regulus says, ducking out of the way before she can swat the back to his head.

“Big words from someone who hasn’t even tried yet,” she says, though she’s smiling. He wonders if her and Merry-Thought are related. If obscene good-cheer is genetic.

Regulus sits up a little straighter and pulls out his wand, realizing that after all that time watching Cerci struggle he still hasn’t come up with a memory. What is his happiest memory? A few moments with his dad come to mind—especially his first time on a broom.

He’d been four, maybe five, his father still healthy enough to fly. He’d let Regulus ride with him, sitting him in front so he’d feel like he was the one driving even though, of course, he wasn’t. It was the best feeling in the world, the first moment his feet had lifted off the ground. His father going higher and higher, eventually doing a few simple turns and rolls. In his memory everything is haloed in sunlight. His dad laughing the whole time.

Regulus blinks, bringing himself back to the present.

“You okay there?” Cerci asks, somewhere between teasing and genuinely concerned.

“Shhh, I’m about to do some very impressive magic,” he shoots her a grin that makes her laugh out loud.

“Well, by all means,” she says, doing a terrible impression of his posh accent.

Regulus stares determinedly at the empty space in front of him. He thinks about the feeling of being in the air, the sound of his father’s laughter; “Expecto-Patronum.”

Something pulls behind his belly button, just the lightest tug before a small puff of smoke comes out of the end of his wand. A barely-there mist.

“Oh my God!” Cerci claps her hands. “You did it!”

Regulus looks at his wand skeptically, “Barely.”

“That was very good Mr. Black,” he turns over his shoulder to see Professor Merry-Thought smiling at him. “You’ve got the right idea, but you probably need something a little stronger

to ground yourself in. Remember what I said, about the feeling of happiness needing to be overflowing. That's where the power of the spell is coming from. The memory should feel almost like a well, something that you can keep drawing on as long as you need to."

"Thank you professor," he says, because he isn't sure what else to say. A well? What the hell does that even mean?

Cerci nudges him with her elbow. "Try again, try again, try again."

"It's not gonna be any better," he says flatly, which only makes her roll her eyes.

"Try it anyway."

Regulus looks back down at his wand and frowns. A memory overflowing with happiness? He finds himself thinking of the morning before Christmas break last year. He thinks of waking up with James Potter for the first time. Usually Regulus can't stand being touched, usually it makes him want to crawl out of his skin, but for some reason James's arms were different. Comfortable. Safe. He'd laid there for longer than he wanted to admit, just looking at James. When he'd finally managed to force himself to wake James up the other boy had smiled, had kissed him, like it was natural. Like he couldn't help himself. Regulus had never felt so warm in his life.

Those images are replaced by the pair of them in the forest, swimming by James's waterfall, lying in the sun. By James standing in the doorway of the Come and Go Room and telling Regulus that he loved him for the first time. The pair of them lying in the grass in his father's garden. Without any fears. Without a war hanging over their heads. James promising to never leave him.

"Expecto Patronum!"

There is nothing gentle about the tug in his gut this time. He thinks he actually jolts forward as a bright, white light spills from his wand and Regulus finds himself face to face with a... reindeer?

"Merlin," Cerci gasps beside him, the whole class going silent as the animal blinks at Regulus. He knows it sounds mad, but there's something...familiar about it.

"He's beautiful," Cerci breathes, causing the phantom reindeer to turn to her. She smiles at him like he's a real animal. "God, a stag, that's so cool."

"A stag?" Regulus repeats.

"Yeah," and then, at the look of confusion on Regulus's face she explains; "You can tell because of the antlers, my father hunts them on our estate all the time."

Regulus wrinkles his nose, looking back at the animal who steps towards him, bowing his head and nudging Regulus's fingers. He can't really feel it, not the way he would be able to if the animal was made of something solid. It's more like a slightly cold tickling sensation.

"Hey you," Regulus says dumbly, well aware that he's speaking to a bloody incantation.

Then, suddenly, the class erupts in applause. Regulus looks over to see that it is, of course, being led by Professor Merry-Thought. “Well done Mr. Black,” she says, beaming. “Really excellent work. Very, very, good.”

He turns back to his stag who definitely gives him a look like: “isn’t this a bit much?” which yes, Regulus thinks, it absolutely is, far too much honestly. He’s glad they’re on the same page.

“To disperse him you merely need to wave your wand,” Professor Merry-Thought says.

Regulus looks at her and then back at his stag, who paws at the ground. “Oh,” he says stupidly. “Right,” he lifts his wand reluctantly, which is ridiculous. It’s not a real animal. It doesn’t have any feelings. Still, it seems cruel when he waves his arm and watches him dissolve into mist.

“Sorry,” he says stupidly, blushing and hoping that no one is paying enough attention to hear him.

He tries and fails not to cringe when Mary Macdonald falls into step with him on his way back to the Slytherin common room.

“You look happy,” she says, somehow managing to make it sound like a threat.

“Must be a trick of the light,” he doesn’t look at her, doesn’t look down either—that would be too weak—so his only option is to keep staring straight ahead.

“Must be,” she muses.

They pass a group of Ravenclaws who give them both a strange look. Of course, Mary Macdonald and Regulus Black walking down the hallway together is just food for gossips. Especially because she used to date Sirius. He’s sure the rumours will be flying by dinner. Fucking Gryffindors, not a subtle bone in their bodies.

“Do you want something?” he growls eventually, after a long and uncomfortable period of silence.

“Many things actually,” he doesn’t need to look at her to know she’s grinning. “You have Quidditch Practice tomorrow night, right?”

Regulus is momentarily thrown. “Er—yes?”

She nods sharply. “Good. I’ll be in the bleachers. Come find me.”

Regulus’s hand tightens around the strap of his book bag. “Why?”

“To chat.”

“About?”

“How you can be of use to me.”

He cringes. Hating her maybe more than is justified. Hating himself for once again being in this position. Under someone’s thumb. Powerless.

“And if I don’t?” he grounds out, turning the next corner into an emptier hallway.

Mary snorts. “C’mon Regulus, you’re a smart guy, I’m sure you can figure it out.” When he doesn’t answer she goes on. “I haven’t decided who I’ll go to first, James or Dumbledore.” She knocks her shoulder against his like they’re old friends, it makes Regulus’s whole body tense. “What do you reckon is the better threat?”

Regulus grinds his teeth. “Fine. Tomorrow. After practice. Is that all?”

“Oooh, so snippy. You’d think you were the one who had their head bashed in.”

Regulus stumbles, memories of Mary on the ground, the sound she’d made when she hit, the dark blood pooling around her head.

She puts her hand on his shoulder, it probably looks good natured to anyone passing by, anyone who can’t feel her nails digging through the fabric of his shirt.

“I need information from you,” she says, voice dropping down. “But I want you to know, that just because I’m not giving you up, doesn’t mean you don’t still make me sick.”

It’s work for Regulus to keep his expression neutral, but then, he’s had a lot of practice.

“Noted,” he manages to keep his tone flat.

She releases her vice grip on him, turning in the opposite direction and walking away without another word. Regulus doesn’t look after her, doesn’t slow his pace. He wonders bitterly if the day will come when the universe will finally give him a choice. Give him the freedom to make decisions about his own fucking life without being at someone else’s mercy.

He doubts it.

PART II: REMUS

He needs to say something. He’s been meaning to. But it’s...delicate. Everything feels delicate between him and Sirius. Sirius is with him but he’s also...not. It was bold, kissing him in front of all their friends like he did, and Remus should have known better than to read into it. Because in the end, Sirius has always been good at the performance—the big gestures—it’s the quiet he can’t handle. The moments when they’re alone and he has to be himself. Be honest. Face what this is. If it is anything. Remus thinks that it might be. It must be. He hopes.

Usually something like this, something you've spent years building up in your head, wanting desperately, lets you down when you finally get it. In the light of day it loses its magic. Thing is, Sirius Black is all magic. Sometimes it's overwhelming. Sometimes, when it's focused on him, Remus doesn't know how to handle it, is certain he's going to crack. It isn't a disappointment, being with Sirius. What it is, is delicate. One big push and Remus is certain that this thing will shatter.

So he needs to say something before that happens. Before all the silences between them start shoving.

Sirius has his head on Remus's chest. Remus almost always sleeps in his bed now, with the curtains drawn and a silencing charm firmly in place. Remus loves it, loves the way the rest of the world disappears and it's just them—together, warm.

He's dragging his hand lazily through Sirius's hair while the other boy reads one of his Muggle fantasy novels out loud:

"That foul-tempered nag is the only thing he cares about," muttered the bard, "and as far as I can see, the only thing that cares about him. They're two of a kind, if you ask me."

"Adaon, sitting a little apart from the others, called Taran to him. 'I commend your patience,' he said. 'The black beast spurs Ellidyr cruelly.'"

Sirius, Remus has recently learned, has a talent for accents, and has taken it upon himself to give each of the characters in the book a specific voice. It makes Remus smile a stupid amount. There's just something so...innocent about it. So soft. Something Sirius doesn't let himself be often.

"I think he'll feel better once we find the cauldron," Taran said," Sirius goes on. "There will be glory enough for all to share."

"Adaon smiled gravely. 'Is there not glory enough in living the days given to us? You should know there is adventure in simply being among those we love and the things we love, and beauty, too.'"

For some reason that last line makes something in Remus's gut squirm. "Do you think that's true?" he finds himself asking, cutting Sirius off.

"Do I think what's true?"

"That bit about, y'know, love being it's own glory?"

Sirius snorts. "Nope."

"No?"

Sirius closes the book and flips onto his stomach, causing Remus to let out an "oof" while simultaneously holding Sirius to him so he doesn't roll off.

“You agree with Adaon?” he asks, somewhere between genuinely curious and mocking.

Remus looks into his eyes and then away. “I don’t know. A bit. Or—I think being loved and loving is worth more in the end, than, you know, slaying the dragon.”

Sirius rolls his eyes. “Well sure, yeah, more than slaying the dragon, but not more than getting the bad guy.”

“In my example the dragon was the bad guy,” Remus smiles a little.

“A dragon isn’t a bad guy though,” Sirius goes on, clearly taking this very literally. “A dragon isn’t bad at all, it’s dangerous maybe, but it’s not, you know, plotting world domination or anything.”

“Right,” Remus says slowly, feeling as though they might be getting off topic. “So you’re saying that if the bad guy is bad enough, defeating him is more satisfying than being with the people you love?”

“I’m saying that love is nice and all, but it doesn’t mean shit if the rest of the world has gone to hell.”

Which Remus supposes is fair. “Alright.”

Sirius gives him a look. “You don’t think so?”

Remus shrugs—with difficulty considering that Sirius is still on top of him. “I think saving the world would feel a little hollow if there was no one I loved in it.”

Sirius seems to consider this for a moment, biting down on his lower lip in a way that Remus finds extremely distracting. “Alright, there’s definitely a compromise here.”

Remus arches his brow. “A compromise?”

“Yeah, like, you know...like saving the world WITH the people you love? Double glory.”

Remus snorts. “That easy huh?”

“Sure,” he shoots Remus a grin that makes his stomach flip. “After all, we’re going to do it.”

Remus feels his breath hitch.

“Oh?”

Did Sirius just—

“You, me, James, Peter. We’ll finish off the Death Eaters. Voldemort. Save the world. Side by side.”

Ah.

Of course.

“Right?” Sirius prods him when Remus doesn’t answer.

He smiles. “Yeah, ‘course.”

Sirius smiles back before leaning forward and kissing him on the mouth. After a few seconds he pulls away but just enough to speak, Remus can still feel his breath against his lips.

“We’re gonna kick so much ass when we get out of here.”

Remus can’t help but laugh. “If you say so.”

“I do,” Sirius drops his head back onto Remus’s chest and after a second Remus starts carding his hand through his hair again.

It’s nice. More than nice really. But there’s still a pit in his stomach that he can’t quite shake.

“Pads?” he asks softly, feeling the slow rise and fall of Sirius’s chest and knowing that he’s getting closer to sleep.

“Yeah?”

Remus closes his eyes for a second, praying to every God he doesn’t believe in that this doesn’t turn into a fight.

“Can we...talk?” he winces.

“Haven’t we been talking?”

“Yeah, yeah we have but...” he doesn’t know how to broach this subject, doesn’t know how to stop Sirius from closing off. From shutting him out.

“Moons,” Sirius gives him a nudge, “what is it?”

Remus exhales. He just has to get this over with, he’ll never be able to let it go otherwise. “You told Regulus that you weren’t gay.”

It isn’t the label that matters so much, but the way Sirius had said it. Like it was something disgusting. Something he didn’t want to be associated with. Sirius doesn’t have to be gay—if the many girls he’s been with are any indication he probably isn’t. But Remus is pretty sure that he’s gay, and he doesn’t want to be something that Sirius is embarrassed of. Disgusted by.

Sirius stiffens against him but he doesn’t pull away and Remus thinks that’s probably a good sign. It certainly isn’t a bad sign.

“Ah,” Sirius says eventually.

“Yeah.”

“I—“ his voice cuts out, and Remus hears him exhale shakily. “Regulus has a way of getting under my skin.”

Remus nods. "Right."

Sirius blows out another breath. "I don't think I can be that."

Remus's hand stills in Sirius's hair. "Be what?"

Sirius doesn't speak. Remus waits for an answer but none come. The silence stretching on long enough that he starts to worry Sirius has gone and fallen asleep in the middle of this.

"Can't be gay?" he hears himself say, filling in the spaces that Sirius won't touch.

"Yeah," Sirius croaks.

Remus's throat feels dry. "Because you like girls?"

"Yeah," and then. "No. I mean, I do, but—"

"There are other things, it's not just gay or straight or whatever. There are other things..." Remus is no good at this. He doesn't know anything, the only gay person he's ever met is himself. At least that he knows of. Actually, James too he supposes, though James is kind of like Sirius. Because he likes girls. Remus has never liked girls, not that way. Never had the choice. Maybe if he had he'd be more like Sirius.

"I don't think I'm those things either. I don't know. I can't—I just can't think like that. I start to get overwhelmed and that's when I run," he props himself up, chin on Remus's chest, eyes looking right at him. "I don't want to run away from you again Moony. So I just can't...I can't think about this," he motions between them with his finger, "as saying something about who I am."

It takes a lot of effort for Remus to control his expression, to not let Sirius see how much that hurts. Bites his lip so that he doesn't say the words crowding his mouth. Doesn't say that that sounds like a lonely fucking way to be with someone. Never thinking about it. Never acknowledging it.

Almost as soon as he has that thought Remus is overwhelmed with guilt. If it wasn't for him Sirius wouldn't have to deal with any of this in the first place, he could just continue on kissing every girl in the school, being the teen heartthrob he was clearly meant to be. It was Remus who started this. Remus who kissed him.

"Hey," Sirius flicks his nose, causing Remus to let out a startled laugh. "Stop it."

"Stop what?" he asks.

"Whatever it is that you're thinking. It's making you sad," something shifts in Sirius's gaze, Remus isn't entirely sure what it is but suddenly he feels himself being tugged down flat onto his back, Sirius hovering above him, hands on either side of Remus's head. He's held in place by those eyes, breath catching in his chest.

"I want you Remus," Sirius says quietly, even though no one can hear them.

Remus's chest aches. "Yeah?"

"Yeah," he lowers himself down enough that their foreheads touch. "So bad. Always have. I don't know about the rest of it, but I know that. I want you."

Which is what he said that night in the common room. The night this—whatever it is—started. Hearing it still makes Remus shiver.

"Have me then," he whispers back, just like he'd done then.

Sirius doesn't need more than that, his mouth on Remus's, hot and desperate, like he has something to prove. Like if he kisses Remus hard enough maybe he won't have to think. Remus brings one hand to the back of Sirius's neck, the other to his lower back. Pushing them together until Sirius is groaning into his mouth.

This always feels a bit like fighting with them—pushing and pulling—leaving their marks on one another. Remus flips them over, forcing the air out of Sirius's lungs as he covers him with his body. Remus focuses on ripping more sounds out of Sirius's willing mouth, letting his teeth drag along his throat. Sirius bucks, trying to regain control, but Remus has length on him, plus he has his arms pinned over his head.

"Fuck you," Sirius says breathlessly.

Remus grins. "I know you want to Black. The question is, can you?" he bites the junction between Sirius's neck and shoulder probably harder than he should but it just makes Sirius moan.

Thank Merlin for silencing charms.

"Such a fucking mouth on you," Sirius mutters and Remus can feel his breath on his overly hot skin. Sirius is good at this stuff. At the physical stuff.

I want you, that's what he says. That's all he ever says. I want you.

Remus pauses, looking down at Sirius whose eyes have gone slightly unfocused in that way they do when things get heated. Is this it? Remus almost asks. Is this how you want me? Is this all you'll let us have?

Sirius turns his head, kissing Remus's wrist where it has his arm pinned beside him. It's almost sweet. "Why'd you stop?" he asks.

For a moment Remus thinks he's going to say it. Going to follow this thing through. Not let Sirius get away with his vague answers and even vaguer promises. Except that Sirius Black is looking up at Remus like maybe he's the only thing he needs. Like he's desperate for him. His wild black hair fanned out around his head, his cheeks rosy in a way they rarely are outside of this bed.

"Sorry," Remus murmurs, shaking his head as he leans back down, bringing their mouths together. "I don't wanna stop," he says nonsensically against Sirius's lips. "Even if this is it I don't wanna stop."

He's actually kind of looking forward to Prefect duty, to being able to breathe for a moment, away from Sirius. Sirius who always takes up so much of the air in every room. So much of the space in Remus's chest.

Remus does try not to think the word love about Sirius. It's hard though. Everything with them always gets so muddled up. Friend, brother, lover. He means too much to me, Remus thinks every time he sees Sirius and feels like the sun is shining out of his chest. The light slipping between his ribs. And then, the more frightening thought; I'll never recover from this. Whatever happens I'll never recover.

"Hello!"

The cheery voice startles Remus out of his thoughts as he looks up to see Cerci Greengrass walking towards him.

Oh perfect, he thinks dryly.

"Greengrass."

She wrinkles her nose. "Please don't, Cerci is fine. Better really. I've never liked the whole last name thing. Feels silly doesn't it? Like we're all a bunch of business associates instead of students."

Remus supposes she's not wrong. Though there are several people that he's more than happy to keep at a business-associate-length distance.

"Well, Cerci, shall we?" he nods down the hallway and she grins.

"Yes, lets!"

The last time he saw Cerci Greengrass she'd been standing next to Regulus Black watching him snog Sirius senseless. The memory makes him cringe. That had been reckless of them, they both knew it. Sirius hadn't so much as sat next to him for days afterwards.

"Soooo," Remus hears after a few moments of silence, barely suppressing a wince. The hallways are looking particularly empty tonight, which normally Remus would appreciate, but currently he'd take a hoard of first years launching stink bombs at him over making small talk with Cerci Greengrass.

"How are you?" she asks.

He nods curtly. "Good. You?"

"I'm great."

They keep walking, Remus not really making eye contact, not sure he could without blushing. He shoves his hands in his pockets just to have something to do.

“How’s Sirius?” she asks. Ah well, now he’s blushing anyway.

“He’s fine,” Remus says stiffly, able to hear the stupid giggly smile in her voice.

“Good,” another pause that is not nearly long enough. “Did Regulus apologize? I told him he needed to, it was out of order the way he spoke to you two.”

Remus would sincerely rather be eaten by the Giant Squid than have this conversation, but he can still appreciate that Cerci is being...nice.

“Er—yeah—he apologized,” sort of. But Remus isn’t about to go into detail. “Thanks for—er—saying that to him.” He cringes at his own fumbling. He honestly has no idea what to do here.

“I think he was just...caught off guard, you know?”

“That makes two of us,” Remus says dryly, causing Cerci to snort.

“Sorry, we should have knocked.”

Oh my god.

He wants to die.

Remus wants to die.

Attacked by a werewolf at five years old but it’s this conversation that’s going to kill him.

He doesn’t respond but it appears that Cerci doesn’t need him to.

“He’s not usually like that, you know.”

Remus finally manages to look over at her, brow arched. “A prick you mean?”

She smiles a little. “Yeah. He was—it’s hard, stuff with his brother,” she gives him a sidelong look. “Though I expect you know that.”

Remus nods slowly. “Yeah, I know.”

“Most of the time Regulus is actually pretty sweet.”

Remus can’t help it, he lets out a derisive laugh. “Sorry, but I find that hard to believe.” He can maybe wrap his mind around the idea that Regulus isn’t evil. But sweet? That’s a step too far.

Cerci doesn’t appear offended. “I’m sure, but it’s true.”

He looks at her and then looks ahead again, chewing on his bottom lip, thinking of James. Of Sirius. He wonders if Regulus is fooling all of them. If he just has a bunch of masks that he wears around different people so that no one ever really knows him. Regulus never helped Sirius at Grimmauld Place, not as far as Remus can tell, and he’ll never forgive him for that.

He's not sure what James sees in him that makes it so he can. James who loves Sirius just as much as Remus. He can accept that, that it's just as much, even if it isn't the same.

"How?" he finds himself asking, but too much time has passed and Cerci looks over at him with a furrowed brow.

"How what?" she asks.

"How is he...sweet?"

She laughs. "Oh—oh I don't know. He just...he remembers that I always forget my quills so he brings extra ones to class, or—I told him once that I was struggling with potions so he just started doing his potions homework with me, without even making me ask. He's honestly one of the smartest people I know but he never shoves it in your face you know? I'm not..." she trails off, tilting her head from side to side like she's trying to find the right words. "I'm not the best at school, but he never makes me feel stupid even though he could. Never mocks me..." she trails off, shrugging. "I know he seems prickly, but I actually think he's just shy."

Her speech is so earnest that Remus forces himself to hold in his skeptical snort at the idea that Regulus Black is shy. Instead he thinks seriously about what she's said, trying to fit it with the person he knows Regulus to be.

Eventually he shakes his head. "I've never met that Regulus Black."

"I know, I don't think his brother has either."

And despite the fact that Remus fully blames Regulus for the state of their relationship—or, at least mostly blames him—that thought makes something ache in his chest.

"So he's the smartest person you know huh?" Remus says, trying not to be a complete ass. He's not sure he'd much like to listen to someone rag on James or Sirius for a whole Prefect shift.

"Oh yeah," she nods her head enthusiastically. "Merlin you should see him do magic, like proper magic, it's so impressive. The other day in Defence Against the Dark Arts he produced a full corporeal Patronus, it was like the most beautiful thing I've ever seen."

That, Remus has to grudgingly admit, is actually pretty impressive.

"It was a massive stag," Cerci goes on, "like taller than me."

Remus feels his feet stutter to a stop. "A stag?" he asks.

She looks back at him, a few paces ahead. "Yeah, I know right? I couldn't believe it either!"

Something uneasy shifts in his stomach. "You're sure it was a stag? Not just a deer or something?"

Cerci shakes her head. "No, it was definitely a stag. We have a bunch on my family's estate, so I've seen loads before."

Regulus Black's corporeal Patronus is a stag.

"Are you alright?"

His eyes snap up, met with Cerci's concerned gaze.

"What—oh—yeah, sorry. That's just...really—er—impressive."

He forces himself to start walking again.

"I think even Merry-Thought was blown away," she says, like it means something. In Remus's experience Merry-Thought is one of the easiest teachers to please. Still, he nods his head, letting her go off while his mind reels.

Regulus Black's Patronus is a stag.

A fucking stag.

The library is closed by the time he's finished his shift with Cerci but has enough books already that he figures one of them must have information on Patronuses. Peter and Sirius are already asleep, James's bed predictable empty, so he grabs an armful of textbooks and heads back down to the empty common room. He sits on the floor, spreading the books out in front of him, and starts looking.

He isn't sure exactly what he's looking for—maybe something that tells him that this actually doesn't mean anything. That it's just some fucked up coincidence. That the shape Patronuses take are in no way related to who someone is or isn't fooling around with.

He makes it through three books before he finally finds what he's looking for. He smooths the page out in front of him, eyes skimming over the text.

'This ancient and mysterious charm conjures...' blah blah blah '...The Patronus charm is difficult...' blah blah blah.. 'a guardian which generally takes the shape of the animal with whom the caster shares the deepest affinity.'

Remus's finger hovers over that sentence. What affinity could Regulus Black possibly have with a stag? Except—except James. But had James told him about his Animagus form? A cold chill runs along Remus's spine. Had he told Regulus about Remus? About—

Remus squeezes his eyes shut.

No.

He thinks.

Please no. I can't do this again. It was hard enough the first time.

But James wouldn't. He wouldn't.

That's what you thought about Sirius, says the nasty voice in the back of his head.

Remus forces himself to exhale, and after few seconds he opens his eyes and keeps reading.

There are instructions about the incantation, the wand movement, a section on corporeal versus incorporeal Patronuses. For the life of him Remus can't remember if James managed one when they were learning about them in class. Remus hadn't, but then, he hadn't been trying, too afraid of the shape his might take if he succeeded.

He keeps scanning through the somewhat bland practical information until his finger freezes again. Right near the end. One of the final sentences on the page:

'The Patronus often mutates to take the image of the love of one's life because they so often become the 'happy thought' that generates a Patronus.'

He blinks, reads the sentence again.

Then again.

The love of one's life.

That's what it says. In his textbook. Not in some Witch Weekly article or pop song, in his textbook. They mean that. Literally. The love of one's life.

Shit.

Oh shit.

Oh shit.

Oh—

The portrait hole opens and Remus slams his book closed, head popping up to see who it is. There isn't anyone though, which can only mean—

"James?" he says into the empty room.

There are a few moments of stillness before James appears, invisibility cloak in hand.

"Moony?" he looks at him quizzically, and of course Remus knows where he's been and who he's been with and a new wave of anxiety washes over him.

"Did you tell him?" his voice comes out small.

James steps closer, looking concerned. "Tell him? Tell who?"

Remus forces himself to breathe, to make coherent sentences. "Regulus, did you tell him about me?"

James's eyes go wide and then suddenly he's moving, crouching down in front of Remus on the floor.

“No, no never. Remus I would never do that,” making sure to hold Remus’s gaze. “I promise.”

Remus swallows, trying to get his heart rate under control. Eventually he manages to nod. “Okay, okay good. Does he—does he know you’re an Animagus?”

James shakes his head. “No.”

Another nod.

“Moons,” James reaches out, placing a steadying hand on his shoulder. “What’s going on? Where is this coming from?”

Remus shakes his head. “I just, I had a shift with Cerci Greengrass and she said something that made me think that maybe he knew.”

Thankfully, James doesn’t seem to need anymore details than that.

“I would never do that to you Remus, okay? I told you I would keep your secret and I will until the day you tell me not to.”

Remus lets out a choked laugh. “Right, of course you will. That was stupid of me, I don’t know why—just—for a second...”

James nods like he understands. And maybe he does. After all, he was there that night in the shack. That night Sirius did the unthinkable.

But you forgive him,

he has to remind himself.

Because he does.

Of course he does.

“I was gonna head up but are you okay?” James asks, pulling him out of his thoughts.

“Yeah,” Remus smiles, though it feels forced. “Yeah, of course. I’ll be just behind you.”

James holds his eyes for a moment longer before squeezing his shoulder and straightening up. Heading for the stairs.

“Hey James?” Remus stops him before he gets too far.

“Yeah Moons?”

Remus swallows. “Did you—have you ever conjured a corporeal Patronus?”

Whatever confusion James might have about the random nature of the question is overshadowed by his desire to brag. “Hell yeah, fourth year.”

Remus rolls his eyes. “Show off.”

But James just preens. “Can’t help it.”

Remus clears his throat. “What—er—what was it?”

James gives him a look like that’s a ridiculous question. “Stag, of course.”

Remus makes sure to keep his expression neutral. “Of course,” he says. “Sorry, just—I was thinking about talking about them in a paper so…”

James grins. “Well, feel free to quote me.”

Remus rolls his eyes again. “Good night James.”

“Night Remus,” though he only makes it halfway up the stairs before he turns back. “You sure you’re alright?”

Remus nods stiffly, throwing him another tight smile. “Yeah, just tired.”

James nods and keeps climbing, bringing Remus’s attention back to the textbook in his lap.

‘The image of the love of one’s life.’

The love of one’s life.

He’d really been hoping this thing with Regulus was a phase.

“Fuck,” he hisses under his breath, gathering his books in his arms. As though they didn’t have enough to worry about without James being Regulus Black’s bloody soulmate.

PART III: MARY

It’s dark, the sky black, the Quidditch Pitch lit by a series of glowing orbs that’ve been levitated around the stadium. The bitterly cold December wind blows against Mary who’s standing on the top level of the Gryffindor stands. Arms crossed over her chest, a light dusting of snow on the ground where the Slytherin players are still milling about after their practice. It’s been a mild winter so far, but Mary has a feeling that that’s about to change. She can feel it, the shift in the wind.

Technically she isn’t allowed to be here, not just because it’s an opposing teams practice but because, since her attack, students aren’t supposed to leave their common rooms after eight, and if they do, they’re required to be in pairs. She could have come with Marlene, could have told Marlene what happened with Regulus, with her memories coming back. What she planned to do about it. She knows Marlene would have been happy to listen—has practically been begging Mary to talk to her.

But she didn't.

Couldn't.

Didn't want to.

She doesn't want to feel better about this. Doesn't want to move on and heal and be the bigger person. These boys want to play dirty? That's fine by her. She can get down in the mud with the best of them. She may be a Gryffindor but Mary knows there's a well of bitter cruelty inside of her that would make Salazar Slytherin himself quiver. The bastard.

Mary didn't tell her friends where she was going tonight. Or who she was meeting. Or why. Because she didn't want to listen to them lecture her on how this isn't the answer, how fighting back isn't going to help. How she needs to trust Dumbledore. Ha. Mary has no idea how to heal, how to sit and reflect and find inner peace or whatever the fuck. But she sure as hell knows how to fight.

"Well you certainly took your time," she says mildly, as she hears Regulus slowly walking towards her. She doesn't turn away from the pitch.

"Be a bit suspicious if I all the sudden ran for the stands" he returns her tone, coming to stand beside her but not too close, more than an arms length between them, like he's worried she's going to turn around and push him off.

Smart boy.

Regulus is still in his Quidditch gear, though he appears to have stowed his broom away somewhere. His black hair is wet with sweat and quickly freezing to his face. The uniforms are alright when you're flying but in a few minutes he's going to be freezing. Mercy takes some pleasure in how uncomfortable he must be.

"Those'll shut off soon," she follows his gaze to the glowing orbs.

A slow leer pulls at the corner of her mouth. "Scared of the dark are you?" she asks.

Regulus only shrugs. "Do you want something or are we just here to chat?"

Mary turns back to the dark field in front of them. She hasn't been able to get on a broom since her attack and it's starting to make her twitchy.

"Mulciber, Snape, Avery," she says finally, feeling Regulus turn to look at her. "They were there." She phrases it like a statement but it's really a question. She needs him to confirm, to tell her once and for all that her head isn't well and truly fucked. That she can trust herself.

"Yes," Regulus says after a short pause and Mary has to stop herself from letting out a sigh of relief.

"Who else?"

Regulus goes stiff.

“Who else Black?”

She looks at him now, his eyes almost completely white in this light. She can’t read his face, he just looks like every posh asshole—haughty and superior.

“There was no one else,” he says eventually.

“Bullshit,” because she can remember—hands and breath and hair. Flashes of a person. “Who else?”

But Regulus doesn’t speak, doesn’t move, just stares blankly back at her with those pale fucking eyes.

“Who else was there Black?”

He shakes his head. “Me.”

She laughs bitterly. “No. Someone else. There was someone else.”

“I don’t—“

“Who raped me Regulus?”

He winces, taking a step back like she’s just slapped him. For a minute she wonders if it was him, his reaction is so big, but no. He’s too small, and those grey eyes—like Sirius’s—it isn’t right.

“No one,” Regulus finally forces through his clenched teeth.

Now she really is considering throwing him off the top. “Fuck. You.”

But Regulus just shakes his head. “I stopped them. That never happened. I swear I stopped him.”

It’s the first break in Regulus’s voice, the blank expression and flat voice melting away. His voice cracks on the word “that” like he can’t stand to think about it. To face it. Coward, Mary thinks coldly, eyes running him up and down.

“You stopped him,” she repeats derisively. “And then you went into my head and stole my memories. You think you’re any different Regulus Black?” he flinches again, taking another step back, he’ll run out of room at this rate. “You’re every bit as guilty as the rest of those creeps.”

“I know,” he says quietly.

“Good. Now tell me who the fuck you took out of my head or I swear to God I will go right to James Potter’s bed and tell him that you were there. That you helped them do it.”

That was the one that would hurt the most, she could see it in his eyes. Dumbledore was scary, but James was the one that would tear him apart.

Regulus just keeps staring at her with wide eyes, like he's trying to find the loop hole. She sees him twist his forearm before she sees the wand sliding out of his sleeve. She almost laughs.

"Expelliarmus," she snaps, he's barely able to do more than touch the wood in his hands before his wand is flying off into the seats beside them. She has her own wand raised and pointed at his face. "What were you gonna to do Black? Erase my memories again?"

He doesn't respond, expression back to an empty mask. He looks at her like she's boring him.

"Tell me who it was," she says again, because she needs to know. She needs to know. She'll never be able to sleep if she doesn't know. Never be able to walk down the corridors without feeling skittish, without worrying about every boy she passes. Never going to be able to stop feeling like she's losing her mind. She needs to know.

After a few seconds Regulus sighs, shoulders slumping. "Barty."

Silence.

"Barty Crouch?"

He shoots her a look and she thinks he's going to say something snippy but instead he just growls; "Yes. Barty Crouch."

And of course.

That day in the hallway.

Of course it was him.

For a moment she closes her eyes and exhales. "Okay," it feels better, having answers. Not great. But better. She opens her eyes again, wand still on Regulus.

"Are we done here?" he asks coldly.

A cold laugh bubbles out of Mary's mouth. "No."

That gets a reaction out of him—something like poorly repressed fear.

"You're going to tell me their schedules, you're going to tell me the password to the Slytherin dormitory, and you're going to let me know every time they leave."

Regulus blinks back at her. "And how exactly am I going to do that?"

Mary grins, reaching into her back pocket and enjoying the way it makes Regulus tense. She pulls out two Galleons, and tosses one to Regulus who fumbles, barely catching it. He turns it over in his hand before looking back at her.

"Are you trying to bribe me? You do know I'm quite wealthy don't you?"

Mary ignores him, holding up her own coin. "Squeeze it."

He looks at her quizzically. "What?"

"In the centre of your palm, squeeze it."

Hesitantly, he does as she asks, causing the coin between her fingers to start to glow. Regulus blinks, looking from his coin to her's.

"Impressive," he manages finally.

"I am." She slips the coin back into her pocket and lowers her wand. "Now we're done."

And as if they've heard her, the glowing orbs hovering around them flicker and blink out. Plunging the pair of them into the dark.

Chapter End Notes

Hey-o !!!

Sorry this is a little late but hopefully worth it! I just love Mary so much, like what a badass. Also I'm glad you guys all liked the cliffhanger at the end of the last chapter cause I was pretty excited about that one.

THANK YOU all for being lovely!

Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

tw / cw : Sexual Content (pretty sure this is the same level as always like very YA-ish maybe a little more spicy but not much)

tw: Implied sexual assault

French translations in the endnotes

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

PART I JAMES

James is pacing. It's the night before Christmas break and he's peeled himself away from the revelries in the Gryffindor common room. They decided to throw a full-on party this year and James tried to enjoy himself but...he couldn't shake the feeling that something was crawling under his skin, making him itch, making his fingers drum and his feet tap. An impatient energy that wouldn't be still.

He can't stop thinking about last Christmas. Can't stop thinking about the way Regulus fell apart when he came back. And he knows it's stupid, because the summer was longer and while Regulus was a little more distant when he came back he was still in one piece. Nothing like the winter. But he'd been in Scotland then and somehow that was different. Different than being trapped in that fucking house. James swears Grimmauld Place is cursed and the idea that tomorrow Regulus will be going back there—it makes him sick.

The door opens and James stops his pacing, Regulus pausing as soon as their eyes meet.

“Oh,” he says, a little startled. “I didn't think you'd be here yet.”

James tries to get his nerves under control, tries to make sure his voice comes out casual. “I can leave and come back if you want.”

“No—“

“You seem disappointed.”

He rolls his eyes. “James.”

“I'm just saying, I'm perfectly fine to do a lap around the castle if you need to prepare yourself to be in my presence.”

“Oh Jesus Christ—I just thought I would have time to wrap this you absolute terror.”

James feels his brows draw together. “Time to—” he realizes that Regulus is holding something behind his back. He has to bite the inside of his cheek to keep his smile from getting too big. “Did you get me a present?”

Regulus gives him a flat look. “Don’t make this into a big thing.”

Oh, James is definitely going to make this into a big thing.

“That’s adorable.”

“Fuck you.”

“Oh my god you were going to wrap it and everything!” James is practically bouncing on the balls of his feet. “Did you get me a bow?”

“I honestly hate you so much.”

“Nah, I don’t think so. You don’t get Christmas gifts for people you hate,” James’s joy in teasing Regulus is momentarily derailed by a new distressing thought. “Oh shit, I didn’t get you anything.”

“It’s fine, I didn’t really expect you to.”

Which James knows he says to make him feel better but it actually makes him feel worse, because shouldn’t he have? I mean, shouldn’t Regulus have expected his boyfriend of more than a year to get him a gift? Hold on—boyfriend? Was James his boyfriend? That seemed right. That was probably right wasn’t it?

“James,” Regulus says, pulling him out of his thoughts. “It’s just a Christmas gift, please stop freaking out about this.”

“I’m not freaking out,” James says automatically, and then; “I’ll give you yours after the break.”

Regulus rolls his eyes. “You really don’t—”

But James holds up his hand. “It’s going to be incredible, a hundred percent worth the wait.”

“You’re ridiculous,” Regulus shakes his head.

“True, now,” James rubs his hands together. “What’d you get me?”

There’s just the smallest moment of hesitation, Regulus biting down on his lower lip like maybe he’s going to try and take it back. But then he holds out his hand. There’s a wooden box in his palm, a little bit wider and taller than a ring box.

James arches his brow as he steps forward. “You proposing Reg?”

“You wish,” the younger boy says, though James doesn’t miss the way his cheeks go pink.

He takes the box, it's a dark red wood with a brass clasp holding it closed. James runs his fingers over it for a minute like it's something precious, eventually popping open the clasp. At first he thinks that maybe it's some kind of jewel, but when he looks closer—

“Is this—“

“Take it out,” James looks up and Reg nods towards the box, nervous. “Take it out,” he says again, softly.

James turns his attention back to the miniature Quaffle, doing as Regulus asked and pulling it out of the box. The minute it's in his palm it starts levitating, at first James thinks that's all it's going to do but then it starts moving around his head like a little wingless hummingbird. He catches it in his hand, laughing before looking back at Regulus who still has his lower lip caught between his teeth. He shrugs like James just asked him a question.

“You're always playing with those bloody Snitches, but you're Chaser so I thought...” he shrugs again. “Makes more sense doesn't it?”

James looks at him and then back at the tiny vibrating ball in his hand. “How—Reg—how did you do this?”

Regulus tilts his head from side to side. “A bunch of boring Charm work really. The permanent shrinking charm was pretty easy but then I had to look into exactly what magic they use to make Snitches behave...well...Snitch-y, and modify it to work without wings,” Regulus lets out a breath. “That, admittedly, took some time. But I think—“

“Reg?”

“—it worked out okay, it doesn't quite have the same abilities a Snitch has but—“

“Reg.”

“—it should still work for, you know, messing around with. I'm almost positive the Charms will hold, they're all permanent, but if they start to fade just tell me and I'll—“

“Reg,” James is standing right in front of him now, their toes touching, Regulus still not meeting his eye though he's stopped his rambling, letting out a shaky exhale.

James lets the silence continue until eventually Regulus speaks, voice very quiet. “I don't—I don't know if that's a good gift. I don't really have anyone to...give gifts to. Especially not —“ he shakes his head, clearly irritated with his inability to explain himself.

“If you don't want it I won't be offended,” is what he settles on.

“Regulus,” James says again, softly. “Look at me, please?”

After a second the younger boy looks up, lips nearly brushing James's chin. “I love it,” James says, voice still quiet.

“Yeah?”

“Yes.”

“Okay,” Regulus exhales, shoulders inching away from his ears. “Okay, that’s...good. I’m...that’s good.”

James keeps smiling. “Can I kiss you now?”

Regulus nods his head so fast he almost head butts James. “Yeah.”

James brings his free hand to the back of Regulus’s head, smiling as he moves the few inches to bring their mouths together. It’s sweet and warm, Regulus opening up for him, his body fitting against James’s in a way that feels comfortable. Familiar. After a few minutes James pulls away.

“This is the best gift I have ever gotten.”

Regulus rolls his eyes. “Okay, laying it on a little thick now.”

But James just shakes his head, brushing their noses together. “No I mean it, it’s—I never could have thought of this, it’s—it’s perfect.” He kisses Regulus again and this time it’s Reg who breaks away.

“I don’t know if you saw...” he says, looking nervous again.

James quirks his brow. “Saw?”

“On the ball there’s...” But Reg appears to be back to not finishing his sentences so James pulls away enough that he can inspect the ball still clutched in his hand. After a moment of turning it over something gold catches his eye. It’s engraved. With a pair of linking letters:

J R

“Oh,” James exhales, seeing their names together like that makes so many things bubble up in his chest.

“Sorry I—it might be a bit gauche. I don’t...for some reason I just liked it, but it’s easy enough to vanish.”

James just shakes his head again and then starts laughing when he realizes that there are tears in his eyes. “Fuck Reg,” he says, almost reverently. He looks at their initials for a moment longer before he places the Quaffle carefully back in its box and puts it on the coffee table next to him.

“I—“ Regulus starts, but James already has his hand wrapped in Regulus’s shirt, pulling him close again, their mouths crashing together. It’s messy and artless and wonderful. All teeth and tongues and Regulus’s soft little gasps that make James want to howl. He pulls their bodies together, his hands in Regulus’s hair, sliding down his back. He gets them under Reg’s thighs, lifting him up, his legs wrapping around James’s waist. He’s taller than him like this and for a minute they pause, James looking up into Regulus’s grey eyes.

“Thank you,” he whispers.

Regulus laughs, the sound sending a thrill through James’s body. They’ve felt so far away from one another recently that this is like being able to breathe for the first time in weeks.

“I want to give you everything James,” Reg is holding his face, thumbs brushing his cheeks. “Everything.”

And then they’re kissing again. James trails his lips across Regulus’s jaw, Reg tilting his head back, giving James more access to his neck. James can feel him swallow against his lips. They stumble towards the bed, James spilling Regulus onto the mattress. Almost as soon as James crawls over top of him Regulus flips them, sitting up so that he straddles James’s hips. His hands slide under James’s shirt pulling it over his head with James’s help.

“Reg,” James says when Regulus starts trailing kisses across his chest, hands working on the buttons of his jeans. “Reg—“

“Yes,” Regulus looks up, mouth hovering just above James’s skin, stare intent. “It’s a yes James, don’t touch me but just let me—can I?” All broken sentences and flushed cheeks and heavy breathing.

James nods. “Yeah—yes. Fuck. Yes.”

The pair of them scramble to get his jeans off—a team effort—inelegant and clumsy. James catches fire under Regulus’s hands, teeth dragging against his hip, kisses pressed to the inside of his thigh. It’s not enough. It’s too much. James’s hand finds its way into Regulus’s hair, careful not to pull.

“Okay?” is all he can get out, several other noises escaping before he’s able to shut his mouth again.

“Okay,” Regulus murmurs against his stomach, causing James’s muscles to jump. Regulus makes a meal of his whole body. Kisses and bites and licks, until James is a quivering mess. All keening noises and declarations of love cut off when Reg bites too deep, though he always apologizes with a kiss.

“Reg—Reg I can’t—I’m gonna—“

And then, being the absolute monster that he is, Regulus takes him in his mouth and the world goes silent. James is nothing but boundless warmth and a magic that sings. He wants to be here always. He wants to be wrapped up in this boy. This love. He wants to never be able to wash it off his skin. Or out of his mouth. He hopes Regulus has left marks. Hopes he can see them in the morning. He’ll wear them proudly—showing the day how they love in the dark.

James gives Regulus’s hair a small tug—a warning. Regulus’s grey eyes flashing up, holding his gaze through his long lashes. Like this is a challenge. Like they’re playing chicken on the Quidditch pitch.

“Fuck—“ James barely manages before it’s all over. His whole body turning to jelly as he breathes hard, vaguely aware of Regulus pulling away from him. He makes a whining noise. “No, c’mere,” he slurs, reaching out.

Regulus snorts, allowing himself to be pulled forward against James’s naked chest. James hums happily, kissing his hair and his temple, before eventually making his way down to his mouth. After a few seconds Regulus rolls off again and this time James doesn’t whine, knowing Regulus well enough to understand that he needs space. Needs to ground himself.

James sits up only long enough to pull his boxers over his hips before collapsing back down. Regulus is beside him, both of them staring up at the painting above their heads that has become so familiar to James that it almost feels like seeing an old friend. He knows all the faces so well he wonders if he could paint them himself—not that he’s ever even held a Muggle paintbrush mind you. After a while Patroclus starts to look too much like Regulus—with his long black hair and pale skin—so James has to look away, chest aching. He turns to the actual boy next to him, fully dressed with his hair is a mess, lips swollen and red. He has his eyes closed.

“You okay?” James asks.

The corner of Regulus's mouth twitches up. “Yes. Very.”

“Good,” James tries to smile but doesn’t quite manage it, not that it matters, Regulus’s eyes are still closed. “You falling asleep?”

“No, just...”

James nods and then; “Yeah, okay.” Because he does understand. At least in the way that he understands everything about Reg—knowing what he needs even if he doesn’t always know why he needs it.

James watches his chest rise and fall, listening to the sound of his breathing. Trying to stay in that happy boneless post-orgasm feeling. But it doesn’t work. The longer the silence stretches on, the longer he looks at Regulus, so peaceful and happy, the more his thoughts from earlier grow louder. Causing something that feels like a swarm of bees to fill up his stomach.

Eventually he inches his hand a little closer to Reg’s on the mattress, brushing their pinkies together. Regulus turns his hand up and James takes it as the invitation it is, slotting his hand inside, fitting their fingers together like puzzle pieces. He squeezes and Regulus squeezes back.

James knows he should let it go, knows they’ve had this conversation so many times, knows it always ends in a fight. But he can’t. Because he loves him. He loves him so much.

“Reg?” he says softly, still holding tightly to his hand. Regulus turns his head, eyes blinking open, he smiles a little, sleepy and soft.

“Mm?”

It hurts. Why don't the stories ever tell you how much it hurts? Even when your heart isn't broken.

"Don't go."

Regulus's expression instantly hardens, the shift so violent it makes James flinch. "Stop it."

"Reg—"

But Regulus is already pulling away, sitting up with his feet over the side of the bed and his back to James. "I'm tired of having this conversation," and he sounds it.

James sits up too. "Don't go back there."

"I have to."

"You don't. You know you don't."

"Christ James, I told you—I told you what would happen if I tried to leave. If they found out about you. You think that won't happen if I follow you home for Christmas?"

James wants desperately to reach out to him, to turn him around, but he doesn't. "I don't care."

Regulus laughs coldly. "No, of course you don't."

But James doesn't relent. "You think I didn't know that this—that us—was dangerous? That it went beyond Sirius finding out? I still chose this. I still want this. I've accepted the risk."

Regulus is gripping the mattress like he's about to fall off of it. "Fuck you."

"Fuck you right back."

"You could get hurt—killed," Regulus goes on through clenched teeth.

"I don't care."

"I care." The sincerity in his voice makes something in James's chest squirm. It's sweet, it is, and yet—

"Stop making me your excuse Reg," he sighs. "If you stay it's because you want to, not because you're protecting me."

Silence.

He can see the tension in Regulus's back. Misses the lazy way he'd held himself before. The soft smile he'd given James when he'd opened his eyes. But this is important.

"Don't go back there," he says again, when it's clear Regulus isn't going to speak.

"I. Have. To."

James feels something like anger flicker through him but he tries to push it down.

“I’m not asking anymore Regulus.”

It’s startling how quickly Regulus’s head snaps around at that, finally looking at James. His normally cold eyes burning.

“Are you ordering me?” Regulus asks, voice sharp.

James could laugh. “No, I’m begging,” and oh God does he ever sound like it. “Please, Reg, please, I’m so fucking scared for you I can’t stand it. I’d take the Cruciatus over having to sit at home for two weeks knowing you’re trapped in that house with those people.”

A series of emotions flicker across Regulus’s face so quickly that James can’t make any sense of them. “Those people are my family.”

But James shakes his head. “Family doesn’t hurt you.”

Regulus sighs again, pinching the bridge of his nose before he gets off the bed, pacing. “You don’t have to be scared,” he says finally, sounding significantly less angry and more like someone trying to placate a small child. “I’ll be fine.”

“That’s bullshit and you know it.”

“I’ve always been fine.”

James nearly chokes, barely able to get the words out of his mouth. “Surviving and being fine are not the same.”

But Regulus only waves a dismissive hand at him. “I’ll be fine.”

It’s getting harder and harder for James to keep the anger out of his voice. “Will Lucius Malfoy be there?”

Regulus jolts to a stop so suddenly James is worried he’s hurt himself. When he looks at James the older boy almost cowers. “Don’t you dare throw that back in my face.”

James’s heart sinks. “Throw—what? Reg, no, no! I’m not—“ Somehow James finds himself on his feet too. “You can’t be safe in a place like that, with people like that. You can’t be fine. Not with him—around,” at the thought of Malfoy James is always hit with the duelling urges to puke and punch someone. “I mean Jesus I’m not fine just thinking about it, it’s been gutting me for days, the idea of you having to be around him. I can’t stand it, I don’t know how you can.”

Regulus just stares back at him and James can’t read him but he knows he’s doing this all wrong, he just keeps hitting walls. Normally he’d be patient, he’d wear them down, but he doesn’t think they have time. In fact, he’s almost positive they don’t.

“You feel so much,” Regulus says eventually.

James lets out a sad sort of laugh. “You noticed.”

Regulus just shake his head, curls all out of sorts, James loves it. “I shouldn’t have told you about Lucius.”

James feels the floor shift beneath his feet. “No, please don’t—you should have. Of course you should have. Regulus I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to—“

“It hurts you,” he interrupts, James going silent. “I didn’t want to hurt you.”

“Reg,” the name is barely a word, more an exhale as James collapses onto the bed again. He rubs a hand over his face. “Everything that hurts you hurts me. But that doesn’t mean I don’t want to know about it,” he makes sure that Regulus is looking at him. “I can handle it Reg. I can handle all of it.”

Regulus gives him a look that clearly says: ‘obviously you can’t’ but James ignores it.

“I just wanna protect you.”

Another long look before Regulus shakes his head. “You can’t.”

“I could if you’d let me.”

“But then I wouldn’t be able to protect you.”

The face James makes must be really pathetic because Regulus instantly steps forward, forgetting to be mad or frustrated or whatever else he is with James. He pulls him forward and because James is still sitting his face ends up somewhere around Regulus’s stomach. He doesn’t complain.

“Hey,” Regulus coos, face buried in James’s hair.

“I don’t know what to do,” James says pathetically. “I hate that you won’t leave. Maybe that’s not fair but I do.”

Regulus only kisses the top of his head. “I know.”

“I hate that they hurt you.”

He doesn’t expect Regulus to respond really, but after a few minutes he hears: “Maybe they won’t this time.”

James wrinkles his nose, burying it further in Regulus’s shirt. “What do you mean?”

He shrugs. “Maybe I’ll fight back.”

James looks up at him then, grey eyes on his. “Didn’t you fight back before?”

Regulus shrugs, like it’s no big deal. “Never saw the point.”

James swallows with difficulty. “And now?”

Regulus's hand slides up James's neck to cup his cheek, thumb brushing just under his eye. "Now there's you."

They're quiet in the morning. Whispering like they're back in their dorms. For a while they just lay on their sides facing one another, James with his hand on Regulus's arm, or side, or in his hair. Always touching. Afraid to let go.

Eventually they have to get up though. Still not speaking. What else is there to say? They've both made their stances clear and James doesn't want to fight anymore. He pauses when they both get to the door, sighing and dropping his head onto Regulus's shoulder.

"Hey," the other boy says, hand making comforting circles on James's back.

James can feel something like tears at the back of his throat and he sure as hell isn't going to start crying right now—Merlin. So he doesn't say anything for a while, not until he's certain he has himself under control. Then he pulls back enough to look at Reg.

"I love you. You know that right?"

There's only a brief pause before Regulus starts nodding. "Yeah. Yeah I know that."

James leans forward and kisses the top of his head. "So fucking much Reg. So fucking much."

"Yeah," Reg says into his chest. "Yeah, me too. I love you too."

And that's all there is really.

PART II: SIRIUS

Sirius is sitting on the train, one knee bent, foot resting on the edge of the seat across from him. Remus had to go do Prefect duty and he's left Sirius alone with a sulking James—God knows why—and a sleeping Peter. Every few minutes Sirius checks the time only to groan internally at how slowly it's passing.

They're all going to the Potter's this year, well, except Peter technically, but his home is the closest to the cottage anyway so he'll be over loads. There was no way in hell Sirius and James were going to let Remus spend Christmas alone with Lyall—or, more likely, just alone because Lyall Lupin is a bastard who would absolutely bail on his son during his first Christmas without his mum. Besides, there's supposed to be a full moon over the break, Remus is already getting twitchy about it. In general Remus is never particularly over the chuffed about the whole werewolf thing but he especially hates it when he has to transform away from the shack. Sirius isn't sure what they're going to do when they graduate but he pushes that thought aside. A problem for another day.

Needing a distraction he gives James's shin a kick.

"Prick," James says, pulling himself out of Sirius's reach without taking his eyes off the window. He's been staring at the scenery all maudlin for like an hour. Sirius stretches out, kicking his shin again for good measure.

"Ow!" James hisses. "Fuck off." But at least he's looking at Sirius now—well, glaring anyway.

"You gonna tell me what's wrong?"

James is rubbing at his leg like a little baby. "I'm just tired," he mumbles.

It's work for Sirius not to roll his eyes. Instead he decides to shoot James a grin. "Yes, that happens when you spend all night out with your boy toy."

James really does roll his eyes, it's all big and huffy and dramatic. He should win an award. "Just leave it would you?"

He means it. Sirius can tell the difference—when James is pouting and when he's actually upset.

"Did something happen?" he asks, tone suddenly sincere.

James sighs, looking worn out, hands scrubbing at his face. "No. Nothing. I don't know."

Sirius feels something vaguely violent starting to grow inside him. "Did he hurt you?" he almost barks.

A pained expression comes across James's face. "I can't talk about it Pads."

"Because he doesn't want anyone to know?"

James nods and then stops himself, "I don't know, maybe that's not fair, it's...complicated."

James always gives everyone more credit than they deserve. Sirius knows that better than anyone. "It is not complicated," Sirius says sternly. "He's gone and made you miserable before Christmas and that's grounds for retribution." Sirius doesn't ask the obvious question—the 'Did he end things' question. Because James will tell him if he wants to. And because sometimes answering that question hurts more than the rest of it.

James gives him a weak smile. "Thanks but I don't think that'll be necessary."

"Um, it's definitely necessary. You look worse than that time someone nearly decapitated you with a Bludger," James rolls his eyes but Sirius continues. "I really think he's unclear on the rules here. I'm the only one allowed to ruin your life."

James snorts. "And you're so good at it."

“I’m an overachiever,” they share a grin before Sirius gets earnest again. “Really James, I mean it, are you okay? You can tell me, I won’t ask his name or like, birthday, or whatever you think is gonna give him away.”

James gives him a sad look. “Thank you, really, but I just—I can’t. I promised.” And that’s the end of it for James. He’s made a promise, and James Potter never breaks his promises.

“Okay,” Sirius says, even though it kills him.

James nods, going back to staring out his window. Sirius hates it—he has half a mind to scream at James about how stupid he’s being but he refrains because he knows it won’t accomplish anything. Once James loves someone it’s kind of game over. The kid has claws that would put Moony to shame and once he gets them in you he never lets go. It’s one of the things that Sirius likes best about him, one of the things that allowed him to relax around James. Knowing that he wasn’t just going to walk away.

But right now it’s fucking infuriating, because if it hadn’t been clear already that the guy he’s seeing is a complete douche-canoe, now he’s out here making James miserable at Christmas.

Christmas for Christ’s sake!

James loves Christmas. James loves Christmas so much that he’s managed to make Sirius love Christmas, which before having met James, Sirius would have thought was impossible. Everything was terrible at Grimmauld Place, including holidays.

“I’m going to go...I’m gonna go find the girls,” Sirius says eventually, because he’s pretty sure if he spends another second in this compartment he’s going to blow-up at James. James who is currently nodding his head.

“Alright,” he says, not tearing his eyes away from the window.

It figures that James would have terrible taste in romantic partners. Things had been looking okay there for a while with Evans. I mean, sure, she was never going to go out with him (at least not until recently), but it seemed promising that he wanted her to. But this? This guy? Clearly a demotion.

Sirius skulks along the train, not really trying to find the girl’s compartment, and maybe a little bit trying to run into Remus on his Prefect rounds. It’s ridiculous how often he misses Remus when he isn’t around, even when it’s only for an hour or two. It’s definitely gotten worse since they started being more than platonic. Since he’s finally been able to get his mouth on him. Been able to fall asleep with his head on his chest. Somewhere deep down he thinks he knew it would be like this. That once he got a little piece of Remus he would become insatiable. It’s frightening really.

He enters an emptier train car, most of the compartment doors thrown open, revealing vacant chairs. There are always spots left over on the holidays when everyone isn’t taking the train back to London. Some people’s parents taking them right from the school, other people’s parents not taking them at all. Sometimes Sirius wonders if that’d be him, if without James he would he be spending Christmas alone in his dorm room right now.

It's a stupid thought.

Without James he never would have left Grimmauld in the first place.

The sound of murmured voices pulls him up short. Obviously it's bad to eavesdrop blah blah blah, but then, if you're too stupid to cast a silencing charm or a muffliato whose fault is it really if you're overheard?

Sirius creeps slowly towards the voices, they're too quiet for him to make out but it definitely sounds like a girl and a guy. He pauses just before the doorway of one of the only closed compartments, making sure to hang back enough that his silhouette won't be seen through the glass.

"I want to keep in contact with you," are the first words Sirius is able to pick out. His brain spinning for a moment when he realizes that it's Mary who's speaking. "Two weeks is a long time, I wouldn't want you to go forgetting about me."

Oh.

Oh shit.

Maybe he shouldn't be listening to this. His ex-girlfriend getting mushy with her new guy is not something he needs to hear.

He's already walking away when the reply comes, a little louder than those before;

"I don't think forgetting you is likely."

Sirius's feet freeze. He knows that voice. He'd know it anywhere.

It's Regulus.

Mary is with Regulus.

That thought alone seems to short circuit his brain for a moment and he doesn't hear anything else that's being said only the noise of his own pulse pounding in his ears. He knows that he ought to go back to his own compartment, that he ought to calm down and talk it out with James and Remus. He's too angry right now. Too caught off guard to handle this at all correctly.

So he's not sure how he ends up turning around, or throwing open the compartment door, or pointing his wand at his brother's face.

"Merlin Sirius," Mary says, shuffling out of the line of fire while Regulus backs up as far as he can against the window, hands in the air. At least they're both fully clothed, Sirius thinks before shivering in disgust at the image that conjures.

"I can't believe you," he hisses at Mary, eyes still on his brother who looks as apathetic about the whole thing as he always does.

“You can’t believe me?” Mary repeats, a dangerous edge in her voice warning Sirius to tread carefully here.

Sirius doesn’t answer her, doesn’t know how to put into words what a fucking betrayal this is. I mean, Regulus? REGULUS. His brother, his fucking Death Eater brother? It’s too close and too sore and too...mean. He wouldn’t have thought Mary capable of it.

“Are you going to use that any time soon?” Regulus asks, voice flat as he nods at Sirius’s wand. “Because if not I have places to be.”

Sirius growls, not at all appreciating his brother’s smug tone. He’s not sure if he’d actually been planning on hexing him or not, but before he can think better of it he hears the word “Levicorpus” spit out of his mouth. Regulus’s legs fly out from under him, pulling him towards the ceiling.

“Fuck,” Regulus startles, while Mary rolls her eyes, collapsing into the seat behind her.

“What are you doing Sirius?” she asks.

He really has no idea. “What am I doing?” he demands. “What the hell are YOU doing? Regulus, Mary? Really? I thought you at least had standards.”

Mary lets out a laugh that Sirius does not appreciate. “I’m not fucking your brother Sirius.”

“No? Just hanging out in empty train compartments whispering sweet nothings into one another’s ears?”

Mary is still looking at him like this is somehow funny. “Sweet nothings? Since when do I whisper sweet nothings into anybody’s ears?”

“This isn’t a fucking joke Mary.”

“Well that’s too bad because from where I’m sitting it’s hilarious.”

“Hilarious? Did he tell you he has the fucking Mark? Huh?” there’s a palpable shift in the compartment, like everyone has collectively started holding their breath. “Well?” Sirius goes on when Mary just stares back at him in horrified silence. “Aren’t you gonna laugh? I thought this was hilarious.”

Mary just keeps staring at him, like she’s trying to work something out. Sirius can’t read her expression. Has no idea what it means. Eventually she turns her attention to Regulus.

“Is he telling the truth?” Mary asks, voice serious. Regulus looks at her and then away. Which, of course, isn’t good enough for Mary. She stands on the seat she’d been sitting on, reaching out and grabbing hold of Regulus’s arm. He barely tries to fight her, maybe realizing how futile it would be.

She pulls his sleeve back without ceremony and part of Sirius expects there to be nothing there. Nothing to reveal. Part of him wants desperately to have misread all the signs. But it’s

impossible to miss, a great ugly snake and skull squirming on his forearm. Sirius has to look away, something vile growing in the pit of his stomach.

“Does he know?” Mary asks, voice colder than Sirius has ever heard it. She’s still holding Regulus’s arm out and Sirius can see him starting to squirm, not able to meet her eyes.

“Does who know?” Sirius asks.

But Mary isn’t paying attention to him anymore. “He doesn’t does he?”

“Please,” Regulus says, he’s shaking, face shockingly pale for someone who’s currently hanging upside down.

Mary looks at him like she’s never heard the word before. “Please? Are you kidding me? You have this on your arm and you want me to, what, lie for you? Protect you? Do you have any idea what this means little boy?” she growls, shaking his arm, Sirius can see her nails digging into his skin, see the sick look on Regulus’s face. “This means you want me dead and you have the fucking nerve, after everything else, to say ‘please’?”

Regulus doesn’t answer, of course he doesn’t, silence has always been his shield. Anger Sirius’s. The louder their mother got the quieter Regulus always became.

Mary shakes her head, throwing his arm away and stepping onto the ground, heading for the open door.

“Mary what’s going on?” Sirius demands.

“Ask your bloody best mate,” she doesn’t stop, doesn’t even look at him. Sirius Black likes to think of himself as brave but he does have some self preservation instinct and there is no way he is going to try and stop her.

For a moment after she leaves the pair of brothers sit in complete silence, neither Sirius nor Regulus able to look at one another or speak or move. Eventually Sirius sighs, waving his wand and letting Regulus drop back onto the ground, maybe a little less gracefully than he should have. Regulus doesn’t say anything though, doesn’t even stand up, just crawls into a sitting position with his back against the seats, hands gripping his knees.

“I take it you’re not shagging my ex-girlfriend then,” Sirius says finally.

“No,” Regulus doesn’t look at him, staring straight ahead, his voice strained like he isn’t getting enough air.

Sirius waits for him to continue but he doesn’t so eventually Sirius is forced to speak again; “What do James and Mary know?”

Regulus only shakes his head. Sirius does his best not to hex him again.

“Is it about Mary’s attack?”

That gets a laugh out of Regulus but it's all twisted and choked and nothing like Sirius remembers. Regulus brings his hands up to his face, holding his head with his elbows on his knees.

“Regulus—“

“God I don't know, yes, a little. I don't know. Just go away.” His words are muffled by his hands. Sirius considers going to find James who is more likely to provide him with answers anyway, but for some reason his feet won't move.

He looks so small,

says the annoying voice in his head.

He looks so lost.

“You said you felt like you were drowning,” the words come out of him before he's even really decided to say them. They've been on his mind since the Veritaserum. He'd been meaning to find Regulus, to ask him about them, but it just somehow never felt like the right time.

“Not now—we're not doing this now,” Regulus mutters. He's still shaking from earlier and for a moment Sirius wonders if he's crying but when Regulus drops his hands his eyes are dry.

“I know what it's like,” Sirius says, watching his brother warily, “to be alone in that house.”

Regulus shoots him a sharp look, the first since Mary left. “You weren't alone. You had me.”

Sirius is surprised by the conviction in his brother's voice. Surprised by how much he means that. “Did I?” Sirius asks, not even in an attempt to be confrontational but just...honest.

“Because I don't remember you ever being there Reg, not when it counted, not when I needed you.”

Silence.

Sirius sighs, running a hand through his hair. “Bella, that day, the last one, she wanted you to torture me, you remember?”

After a brief pause Regulus nods.

“Would you have? If dad hadn't stepped in? Would you have done it?”

His brother is looking at him with his real face. Maybe that doesn't make any sense, but it's true. Most of the time when Sirius sees Regulus he's walking around with this expression of disdain that is far too similar to their mother's. But here, now, he looks like Reg. Looks like the kid who used to follow Sirius everywhere, used to beg him to read stories and build snow forts. Who used to crawl into his bed at night when he was scared—not their parents bed, but his.

He'd always felt more like a parent than a brother to Regulus, maybe that's why it hurt so much. That when things started to get bad, really bad, Regulus disappeared. He may not have chosen their parents, but he certainly didn't choose Sirius either. Instead he'd gone and made himself as small and quiet as possible. As though hoping the world would simply overlook him. Never forcing him to make up his mind.

Eventually Regulus sighs, running a hand over his face before meeting Sirius's stare.

"Yes."

Sirius closes his eyes for a second. It hurts. But only a little. After all, it's not as though he hadn't been expecting it.

"See?" he says, opening his eyes again. "Alone."

Regulus only looks away, back down at his knees and Sirius realizes that he doesn't even feel angry anymore, just...sad.

"Joyeux Noel Reg," he says dryly, "J'espère que cette année tu apprendras à nager." He walks away before his brother's silence can get too loud.

Chapter End Notes

** "Merry Christmas Reg, I hope this year you learn how to swim" **

Hey! Hi! Hello!

I feel like this was short but concentrated - like all the scenes are pretty juicy (but maybe I'm wrong)

Thank you as always for the comments and kudos, makes my day! Love hearing all your thoughts and theories!

Chapter 31

Chapter Summary

Mary: the meaning is not known for certain, but there are several theories including "sea of bitterness," "rebelliousness," and "wished for child."

Chapter Notes

Tw: Referenced sexual assault

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Mary isn't an idiot. She knows that she isn't alright. Between her inability to sleep for more than a few hours at a time and her new paranoia that she's constantly being followed, she's definitely spiralling in a downward direction. Still, sitting on the roof of her childhood home blowing smoke into the pink evening sky, she's finding it hard to care. Well, actually, she's been finding it a bit hard to care in general lately.

It's too cold for this but she can't stand being inside anymore. She feels trapped. Trapped by the bedroom she grew up in, more full of the kid she used to be than the person she is now. She barely recognizes herself these days, barely remembers caring about the boys whose posters are hung-up on her walls, or the names of her stuffed animals or the girls who gave her the friendship bracelets still sitting on her dresser—carelessly taken off one day and never put back on.

She breathes in deep, filling her lungs with all the smoke she can, letting it burn, holding it in until she starts to cough and choke. She sits up, throwing the nearly finished cigarette off the edge of the roof and letting the tears squeeze out of the corners of her eyes. She doesn't really cry, hasn't in a long time, this feels good though, even if it isn't the same.

She hears him coming before she hears the window sliding open.

"I thought dad fixed this?" Damian says, pulling himself through like he was invited.

"He did," Mary nods at the window screen she'd popped out and thrown further down the roof.

Damian lets out a low whistle as he settles next to her. "You're gonna get hell for that."

Mary only shrugs, looking out at the quickly darkening sky. A particularly bitter gust of wind blows through them, sneaking right under her jumper and through her skin.

“Fuck,” her brother hisses, crossing his arms over his chest. “Bloody freezing out here.”

“No one’s stopping you from going back inside.”

Her brother lets out a huff. They’re close in age, only two years apart—Damian being the older sibling. They used to be close in other ways too, used to be friends. Though every time she comes home it gets harder and harder to remember that. Damian’s at Uni now. Mary can never remember which one. Can’t imagine she’ll ever go to one herself.

“Who was he then?” Damian asks.

Mary reaches into her pocket and pulls out another cigarette. Excessive, but she knows he hates the smell and she’s hoping it’ll make him go back inside. “Who was who?” she asks, lighting the thing the old-fashioned way—with matches she stole from the kitchen. She’s gotten too used to doing this with magic.

“The boy who’s got you out here being moody.”

She inhales, the smoke scratching her raw throat. “There’s no boy,” she says on her exhale, it’s insulting but not surprising that he thinks everything she feels is because of some boy. But then, she supposes there’s no way he could guess at what the actual problem is.

It’s incredibly easy to hide things from your parents as a Muggle-born. For all their talk of inclusivity Hogwarts has never been particularly committed to communicating with the Muggle families of their students. From what Mary can tell, all her parents were told about her attack was that she got injured and would recover quickly. When her parents asked her about it she told them it was a Quidditch injury, just the mention of the word ‘Quidditch’ made their eyes glaze over. There were no more questions after that.

“Then what is it?” Damian pushes, she can feel him looking at her without turning her head. He coughs as she lets go of another cloud of smoke. “What’s going on with you?”

It’s an interesting question; what is her problem exactly? Is it that a group of boys she goes to school with violated her in every possible way? Is it that there’s a war coming that she has no choice but to be a part of? Or, perhaps, is it that the one person she trusted with the truth—with her feelings about all of this—is involved with one the bad guys? Because maybe James doesn’t know about the Mark but he still knows who Regulus Black is. The kind of person he is. And what people like him do to people like Mary.

“Oi! Earth to Mary?” Damian snaps his fingers in front of her face.

She looks over at him and then back at the now black sky, flicking the ash off the end of her cigarette. “Never mind, you’re right, it’s a boy.”

Mary barely tries to sell it, but Damian doesn’t appear to need much convincing. “You need me to beat him up?” She’s pretty sure he’s only half joking.

“No,” she says firmly, something cold coiling in her gut. “I have it covered.”

“Out?” Lily repeats.

Mary rolls her eyes, lying on her back on her bed, curling the phone cord around her finger.

“Yes, out. It’s New Years Eve.”

“Sure, but we normally do a movie night on New Years—you, me, Alice, Marlene.”

“Yes, I know, I’ve been there. Aren’t you bored of it?”

“No.”

That makes Mary smile. She’s always admired Lily’s ability to be completely immune to peer pressure. Lily does what she wants when she wants to and doesn’t care whether anyone else thinks it’s cool or not.

“Well, I am, so I say we all go out this year.”

“Out where?” she doesn’t need to see Lily’s face to know that she’s frowning.

“There’s a club in London,” Mary says, as casually as she can. As though going out to Muggle clubs is something she does all the time.

“There are several I would imagine.”

“Well look at you with the jokes, little Miss Sarcasm. It’s called Infinity, they’re doing a whole New Years Eve thing. We should go.”

There’s a brief pause. “We’re underage.”

“Damian can get us fakes.”

“All of us?”

“Mhm,” Mary inspects her nails. “Oh, also, can you invite James and the crew?”

There’s some static like maybe she’s dropped the phone. “You want the boys to come?”

“Obviously.”

“And you can’t invite them because...?”

Mary lets out an exasperated sigh. “I’m busy with other preparations.”

“Why can’t Marlene—“

“I’m sorry,” Mary interrupts, sounding not at all sorry. “Have you lost your ability to speak with James Potter? Been hit with some kind of anti-James Potter curse I’m not aware of?”

Lily mutters something under her breath that Mary can't hear.

"What was that? I didn't catch it," she says in her most sickeningly sweet voice.

"No, I have not lost the ability to speak to James Potter."

Mary grins even though Lily can't see her. "Excellent, then put on your big girl pants and send him an owl."

Lily huffs on the other end of the line. "I just don't understand why it has to be me."

"Oh I'm sorry, I thought that was obvious. You fancy him, so I think it's funny," also, he's currently fucking Regulus Black and I want to know how serious it is - of course, Mary doesn't say that bit. But if Lily can turn his head then maybe the problem will resolve itself and Mary will have one less pit in her stomach.

"You're a terrible person," Lily says flatly.

Mary snorts. "So I've been told."

"I still think this is a bad idea."

"But you're coming anyway?" Mary can practically hear Lily rolling her eyes over the phone.

"As if you'd let me say no."

"Smart girl."

There's a small pause and Mary instantly feels her skin start to crawl. She knows what's coming and she ought to just cut it off at the pass, just say goodbye and hang up before Lily has the chance. But for some reason she's decided to be a masochist today.

"This silence is feeling very poignant Evans."

Lily huffs out a laugh. "It is a bit."

"Well then, spit it out, what do you want to say?" Mary does her best to maintain an aura of indifference.

Eventually Lily sighs. "Are you alright Mary?"

Ah, yes. There it is. Since the attack she hasn't been able to have a single conversation with her friends without it ending up here.

"Sure."

"Sure?"

"Well, I'm bored as hell right now," which isn't exactly a lie.

She likes her family, really she does. Her mother is bright and colourful and her father is soft and sweet and their home is a mess but only if you don't know it very well. There's a genius to the chaos, to the walls that are covered in far too many photos and the red sofa hiding under far too many pillows. She likes her family. Her home. Except that these days they don't really feel like her's anymore. Magic building a wall between them. It makes her stir crazy.

"Damian not keeping you entertained?" Lily asks. She's met Mary's brother a few times, back when they were still young enough to have playdates. Despite being older Damian has always been more than happy to play with Mary's friends. With her. Probably still would if she'd let him.

"Damian's a goody two shoes, you know that. Speaking of terribly dull older siblings," Mary goes on, desperate to change the subject. "How is Petunia?"

Lily snorts. "Not living here anymore, thank God. Me and mum went to visit her new place the other day and it was just...bleh, you know?"

Mary laughs. "Where is she living now anyway?"

"Surrey."

"Oh God no."

"Uh-huh, it's like no one there is even a real person, all the houses look identical and Petunia was wearing an apron when she answered the door and Vernon was in a suit and he made her serve us."

"What!"

"Right?" Lily's tone is similarly indignant. "She was in the kitchen basically the whole time and me and mum offered to help but she wouldn't let us and then Vernon got all snobby about having a wife who didn't need help, like that was some sort of brag?"

"That man is the worst person I have never met."

"You have no idea," Lily sighs. "Anyway, I don't know, she seems happy so I guess that's all that matters. They're talking about having kids soon."

"Oh no! They want to procreate? That can't be good for the future of the human race."

Lily laughs. "God, I shouldn't find that funny."

"Of course you should, I'm hilarious."

"Just be grateful that Damian hasn't gone and married an absolute prick."

Mary opens her mouth to confidently say that Damian would never, but finds that she can't quite get the words out. Because she actually doesn't know if that's true. She finds herself looking at the wall that separates their bedrooms. She's never met one of his girlfriends

before, never been home long enough or at the right time. She actually has no idea what kind of girls he dates.

“Mary?”

“Sorry—sorry—talk of matrimony always makes me maudlin.”

“You don’t think you’ll ever, you know, wanna get married?”

Mary laughs before she can stop herself. “For some reason I just don’t see that happening for me,” and then; “What about you?”

“Mmm,” she can tell that Lily is biting her lip. “It might be nice, I don’t know, have to be the right person though.”

“I do think that is the general idea with marriage.”

“You know what I mean.”

“Sure.”

Lily laughs like she knows Mary is only humouring her. “Right, well, I should go. But Mary?”

“Yeah?”

“You can talk to us you know? Really.”

Mary swallows. “I do know, yeah. I just...don’t want to.” She couldn’t say that to Marlene, it would upset her too much. But Lily, she somehow knows, will understand.

“Okay. Well, I’ll see you New Years Eve I guess.”

“No guessing. Say hello to Jamie for me!”

“I’m hanging up now!”

Mary makes a series of kissing noises into the phone until the line goes dead.

Okay, so it’s possible she isn’t actually getting their fake ID’s from Damian (because he’s such a bloody goody-goody that he would never), it’s possible that she is, in fact, magicking them, which may or may not be a little bit illegal. Usually she can get away with smaller spells without anyone seeming to notice, but since there are so many ID’s she decides to go on a day trip to Diagon and charm them there. It’s almost impossible for the Ministry to know who’s casting in a magic location that busy. Plus, it gets her out of the house and away from her family.

“You’re going out?” Damian had caught Mary trying to make a swift exit out the front door that morning.

“Mhm,” sliding a pair of oversized sunglasses onto her face. “Why?”

“No reason just...” he’d shrugged, shoving his hands into his pockets. “Thought maybe we could hang out for a bit.”

“Another time, yeah?”

“Where are you going? Maybe I could come with, or give you a drive?”

“No!” she’d said too fast and too sharp, “Sorry, it’s a magic thing.”

Damian had instantly frozen. “Ah,” the hands returned to the pockets. “A magic thing.”

“Yup, okay, so...see you later?”

Now, sitting outside Florean’s with an ice cream cone, charming ID’s into existence, she feels a little guilty. She isn’t sure why she’s so desperate to get away from him, why the idea of spending time alone with her brother is so frightening. She just knows that it makes her skin crawl every time she thinks about it.

Maybe,

hisses the irritating voice in her head.

You’re afraid that he still knows you too well. That he’ll see right through you like he always did. Maybe you’re afraid that you want him too.

“Stupid,” she mutters to herself, punctuating it with another flick of her wand. She picks the newly formed card up, squinting at the details. The ink is bleeding a little but it’ll have to do. She has no idea why that happens.

Suddenly there’s the sound of screeching metal and then— “Shit.”

Mary looks up to find Regulus Black on his hands and knees a few paces away from her, ice cream all over the cobble stone in front of him.

“Fuck,” he mutters, pulling back so that he’s sitting on his heels, inspecting his hands which appear to have gotten scrapped on the way down. Mary wonders if he’s seen her but that question is answered a second later when his eyes flash up and meet her’s.

She arches her brow. “Was that my fault?” she asks, feeling a little smug that just the sight of her sends Regulus Black to his knees.

“I’m not sure you can take credit for my lack of coordination,” Regulus mutters. “But I wasn’t expecting to...see you here...or anyone really.”

“Pretty popular place to be if you don’t want to see anyone.”

He nods, looking back down at his hands. “Yeah well, most people aren’t getting ice cream in December.” Which might be a valid point, but since Florean’s patio has a warming charm permanently cast over it in the winter Mary hardly sees why the weather matters.

“They let you out on your own little Black? Or is your Mummy around here somewhere?” Mary asks, intrigued when she sees the colour rush to Regulus’s cheeks.

“My mother isn’t here, no.”

“But? I’m sensing a definite ‘but’ at the end of that sentence.”

Regulus grimaces. “Kreacher is with me—our house elf. We’re getting some things for Christmas dinner.”

“I see,” she runs him over with her eyes. It’s strange to see him out of his Slytherin colours and Wizarding robes. Instead he’s wearing a grey peacoat and black pants, a pair of pointy leather boots on his feet. Dressed like this she can almost forget that he’s the heir to the Black family dynasty. Almost make the mistake of thinking he’s just another boy.

“So you left the elf—“

“Kreacher,” he corrects.

Mary arches her brow but doesn’t comment. “—Kreacher, to do all the work while you fucked off to get ice cream? Very nice Black.”

“Actually, I was getting us both ice cream. Not that it matters now.” Both of them look down at the massacre in front of him.

“You were getting your house elf ice cream?” she repeats.

“Technically sherbet, that’s his favourite.”

Mary wrinkles her nose. “Ew. Sherbet.”

Regulus nods gravely. “I know, I keep trying to get him to try something else but he’s adamant. Honestly, I think he just likes how colourful it is.”

It suddenly hits Mary that she’s having a conversation with Regulus Black about his house elf’s ice cream preferences and she has no idea how she’s meant to process any of that.

“Ah,” Regulus says knowingly, after a pause that is too long to be comfortable.

“Ah?” she asks.

“You’ve just remembered.”

“Remembered what?”

He gives her a dry smile. “Who you’re talking to.”

Well at least he's self-aware. If such things matter when it comes to psychotic blood purists, which Mary is pretty sure they don't.

"That happen to you a lot?"

He shrugs. "Probably more than most people."

Another long pause.

"Are you planning to stay on the ground forever? Or are you waiting for your house elf to come help you up?"

Regulus blinks, looking down at himself like he'd forgotten he was still kneeling on the ground.

"Right, no," he mutters, getting to his feet and quickly vanishing the mess he'd made.

"Well," he brushes his hands off on his coat, "I'd better go."

"Aren't you gonna replace your ice cream?"

He shakes his head, looking a little rueful. "I don't think so. Running into you, falling—doesn't feel like the universe is a fan of me getting ice cream today."

Mary very nearly laughs. "That's absurd, you do realize that?"

"Oh yeah, absolutely."

She shakes her head. "Well alright then," turning back to her ID's, not willing to actually say 'good-bye' to him, like this was a real conversation, like he deserves civil niceties.

And that should be the end of it.

Really, she means for it to be.

But then, before she can stop herself, she hears herself say:

"You said sorry."

Regulus is already halfway into the road and Mary wonders if he's going to pretend he didn't hear her, but after a few seconds of hesitating he retraces his steps, coming to stand in front of her table.

"When you left me outside the infirmary," she clarifies. There's no one around but she watches Regulus's eyes do a quick search anyway.

"Yeah," he says finally. "I said sorry."

"Why?"

He arches his brow. "Why?"

“Yes. What exactly are you sorry for Regulus Black?” She stares him down, waiting for him to decide how honest he’s willing to be. How honest he’s capable of being.

“I don’t know,” he says eventually. “All of it I guess.”

Which is barely an answer. “You didn’t have to do it, you could have just taken me to the infirmary and left my head alone. No one one was forcing you, there was no wand to your head.”

Regulus nods slowly. “I could have.”

“But you didn’t.”

His eyes keep hopping around, making sure no one is within hearing distance. Not that Mary thinks it would matter much if they were. If they can’t punish Mulciber for this because of his family connections there’s no one way that anything is going to happen to Regulus Black.

“You have your people and I have mine, I expect you’d do what you had to to protect them.”

Mary does her absolute best not to hex him. “My friends don’t normally go around assaulting people.”

Regulus looks away but doesn’t move, even when Mary thinks he might—might just walk away from this conversation.

“I don’t agree with what they do.”

“No,” she say sharply. “You just make sure they can keep on doing it.” And when he goes silent again, she continues; “You must spend a lot of your time being sorry.”

A sad sort of smile comes across his face. “I do actually.”

“How fucking useless of you,” her voice is so sharp she’s surprised he isn’t bleeding. “A sorry Death Eater.”

He flinches, pulling nervously on his sleeve. “Are you going to tell him?”

She arches her brow. “Who?” he gives her a look like: ‘You know who,’ and she does. But she’s still going to make him say it.

After a few seconds of tense silence he sighs. “James.”

“Ah,” she says. “Yes.”

She’s not sure what answer he was expecting but he recoils almost instantly, face going pale. Funny, she wouldn’t have thought he was capable of caring that much about someone other than himself. But then, James has always had a way with the Black boys hasn’t he?

“When?” Regulus asks, sounding like he’s having trouble breathing.

Mary gives him a once over and then shrugs, “I’m seeing him New Years Eve.”

Regulus flinches.

“I know that I’m not in a position to ask for favours—“

“No, you’re really not,” Mary interrupts, but that doesn’t deter him.

“Please, can I—can I do it? Can I just—can I be the one to tell him?” he looks at her beseechingly. “I’m worried that if you tell him now, before he can...reach me...he’ll do something stupid.”

Mary would like to dismiss this fear, but, she’s known James long enough to see the truth in it. “Like show up at Grimmauld Place demanding to speak with you?”

“Yes,” Regulus says, voice tight. “Exactly like that.”

Mary has no idea how that would end. Not well she imagines. Not well for anyone.

“Alright,” she says finally, watching as Regulus’s whole body seems to relax, he has to reach out and grab the table in front of him for support. Mary leans forward, “You have two weeks after we get back,” she says calmly. “If you haven’t told him by then I will.”

Regulus still looks deathly pale. “Okay,” he says, sounding a bit hollow. “Okay.”

Mary nods, leaning back in her chair. “Good. Glad that’s settled. Now get the fuck away from me.”

Regulus doesn’t need to be told twice. Turning around without ceremony and stumbling across the street. Mary is not at all confident that James still won’t do something stupid, even if they are at Hogwarts, even if Regulus is the one to tell him. But she supposes that at least whatever he does at school will be less likely to get him killed.

She sighs, looking over at her melted ice cream and vanishing it. She should probably be a little more cautious with the amount of underage magic she uses but she can’t bring herself to care.

Without much pause she turns back to the task at hand: making sure her and her friends can get absolutely plastered on New Years Eve.

“Give it back!”

“I don’t have it!”

“Yes you do you little twerp! Give it back!”

Mary has barely closed the front door behind her when her little sister comes barrelling into the hall, throwing her arms around Mary’s waist and burying her head in her stomach.

“What’s up buttercup?” she asks, gently patting her head. There’s no time for an answer before Trinia walks in already rolling her eyes.

“God Lu, you’re such a baby.”

“Hey—no name calling,” Mary says without thinking.

“She stole my shirt,” Trinia says, crossing her arms over her chest.

Trinia is thirteen and Lu is eight. When they were younger their parents used to refer to the three of them as ‘the girls.’ As in ‘Here comes Damian and the girls,’ like they were some sort of band.

“No I didn’t!” Lu says into Mary’s stomach. It’s almost certainly a lie but Lu’s always been Mary’s favourite so she doesn’t say anything.

“You did. Now tell me where it is!”

“Wait,” Mary holds up her hand. “You don’t know where it is? Then how do you know she took it?”

Trinia puts her hands on her hips and rolls her eyes. “Because it’s missing,” like Mary is the stupidest person on earth.

“So?”

“Sooo,” Trinia repeats, dragging out the word. “She obviously took it.”

“I didn’t!” Lu stamps her foot, still clinging to Mary.

Trinia narrows her eyes and looks like she’s about to say something vicious when Mary cuts her off. “Have you checked your room?”

“What?” she asks indignantly.

“Have. You. Checked. Your. Room?”

“It’s not in my closet or my hamper,” Trinia says stubbornly.

“But you didn’t check anywhere else?”

Trinia throws her arms up in the air. “I don’t need to, I wouldn’t put it anywhere else. She’s taken it.” She jabs an accusing finger at their little sister.

“You really shouldn’t go around making unfounded accusations like that.”

“Yeah! You’re being super unfunded!” comes Lu’s little voice, and Mary has to bite the inside of her cheek to keep from laughing.

“Ugh, whatever, you two are so annoying.”

With that she turns around and stomps back up the stairs to her room. Mary waits until she's certain the coast is clear before she crouches down to Lu's level.

"Did you take the shirt?" she whispers.

Lu stares back at her with big brown eyes and for a moment Mary thinks she might not tell her, but then she smiles. "Yeah."

Mary smiles back, she can't help herself. "I thought so. Where'd you hide it?"

"Mum's bedroom. She'll never check there and even if she does, Trinia isn't dumb enough to yell at mum for stealing her clothes."

Mary laughs, mussing her hair before straightening up again. "You're a little evil genius aren't you?"

Her sister grins at her, missing a few of her teeth. "Yes."

"Alright, go on you gremlin, before Trinia comes back and starts yelling at us again. Where is mum anyway?"

"Kitchen," Lu says, already scrambling up the stairs, practically on all fours.

Mary nods, hanging up her bag in the front hall before walking to the other side of the house.

She'd hoped that Trinia would get a letter when she turned eleven. There'd never been any question that Damian was a Muggle, being older than her, but Mary had been convinced that she couldn't be the only one—surely her sisters would be witches. It had been devastating when Trinia's birthday came and went and no letter arrived. Not for Trinia of course, or their parents, neither of them seemed to care much one way or the other. But Mary, Mary had been so desperate to have someone else in her family who understood. They'd all been so close when she was growing up, she missed that. Now there was this wall between Mary and the rest of her family. She'd thought that maybe if she wasn't the only one it would help break some of that down.

She was doing her best not to hope with Lu.

"Hey," Mary says as she slides into one of the chairs at the kitchen table and watches her mother flutter around making dinner. It smells good, warm and spicy, but then, it always does.

Carry Macdonald looks over her shoulder and smiles. "Hello sweet-pea, how was downtown?"

Her mother has a head full of brown curls that are piled haphazardly on the top of her head, loosely held by a silk handkerchief and collection of pens and pencils she's stuck in it and then forgotten about.

"It was good," Mary loves watching her mother cook, she always has. It's like a whole production, with music on in the background and her mum constantly chopping and stirring

and mixing. The food at Hogwarts is good but it's...impersonal. She tried to explain that to Marlene once but she doesn't think she understood. There is just something about her mother's food that is so undeniably her. Made with love, she always says.

"Did you see any of your friends?" her mother asks while meticulously dicing an onion into tiny pieces.

Mary thinks of Regulus Black and nearly laughs. "No, no I did not."

Her mother glances up, something a little too knowing in her eyes. "That's too bad."

Mary tries to look casual. "Sometimes it's nice to be alone."

Her mother holds her stare for a moment longer before turning back to her cooking. "Sometimes."

Part of her wants to tell her mother—tell her what really happened this term, tell her about the war and the Death Eaters. Wants to tell her that she feels like she's in over her head and she doesn't know who to ask for help, not because she doesn't have people around her who care but because she's not sure she has anyone who can bear it all.

"Damian was pretty disappointed that he missed you today," her mother interrupts her thoughts, snapping her back to the present.

Mary makes sure to keep her expression neutral. "If he wanted to hang out he should have said something sooner."

Her mother makes a noise that Mary knows means; 'I don't agree with you but it's not worth fighting about'.

"You're still going out on New Years Eve to a friend's place, yes?" she asks, and Mary doesn't like where this is going.

"Yes," she says cautiously.

"You should bring Damian with you."

Mary rolls her eyes. "I'm sure he has his own friends."

"He does, he sees them all the time. He wants to see you."

"Mum," Mary says in a tone of voice that is eerily similar to Trinia's.

"Mary," her mother volleys it back at her.

"He won't know anyone," which isn't strictly true, Damian does technically know Marlene and Lily. "I don't want to have to babysit him the whole time."

Her mother laughs, dumping something into a pan that sizzles. "I'm sure Damian will be able to manage a few social interactions without you holding his hand."

“You can’t make me bring him,” Mary says petulantly, folding her arms over her chest.

Her mother looks over at her, brow arched. It’s an intimidating expression, one Mary has stolen from her mother and put to good use on many occasions.

“Are you and Damian fighting?” her mother asks finally, taking Mary by surprise.

“I—no?”

“Good,” her mother rests her arms on the counter separating them, leaning towards her.

“Mary, he just wants to be your big brother, he doesn’t get to be very often, so…throw him a bone every once and a while okay? It’s Christmas.”

“So you’re playing the Christmas card now,” Mary says, though for some reason her throat has grown unreasonably tight.

Her mother smiles. “Absolutely.”

“Fine,” Mary sighs. “I’ll ask him. But he probably won’t want to come anyway.”

This does not stop her mother from beaming at her, walking around the counter so she can pull Mary into a hug. “Thank you,” she gives her a good squeeze before kissing the top of her head and going back to her cooking.

“Will you set the table?” she calls over her shoulder. “It’s almost dinner time.”

Mary makes a big show of getting up and getting the plates, but the truth is, she doesn’t mind, she simply has a reputation as a brat to maintain. And if her mother’s smile is anything to go by, she knows it.

“Just don’t be weird okay?” Mary says for the hundredth time as her and Damian walk down Carnaby street. It’s busy and dark and a little cold. Mary can feel the excitement in the air, people already tipsy and loud. It smells like cigarette smoke and cheap beer and something deep fried. In other words, it smells like a party.

Damian laughs. “I’m not going to be weird. You know, most people like me a lot actually.” He shoots her a grin.

“Yeah, yeah, you’re a big popular football lad, I get it,” she rolls her eyes.

“I don’t know what you have against football.”

What she has against football is the fact that her parents have attended every game her brother has ever played since he was six. What she has against football is the cabinet full of Damian’s trophies in their living room that their father practically drools over every time they have company. ‘Oh have you met my son, Damian, he’s a football star’ which isn’t even true, by the way. He’s only playing on the Uni team and doesn’t plan on going pro.

What she has against football is that she is every bit as good a Quidditch player as her brother is a footballer and her parents will never understand that. Not because they actively don't want to, not because they're trying to choose favourites, but because they grew up with football. They can brag about it to their friends. They can't even tell their friends where Mary goes to school, let alone that she plays a sport on a flying broomstick.

"I don't have anything against football," she says, after too long a pause.

"Uh-huh. So, am I gonna be meeting anyone special tonight?"

She shoots him a look out of the corner of her eye. "Special?"

"Love interests?"

Mary pulls a face that makes Damian laugh. "Gross, don't ever say that again."

"I'm just asking! I'm a good wingman you know."

She gives him another skeptical look. "Somehow I doubt that. But no. No one of interest. One ex-boyfriend I suppose."

Damian instantly stiffens. "Is this the guy who broke your heart?"

Mary scoffs as they round the next corner, music pouring out off every building they pass. "No boy has ever broken my heart." Mary is pretty sure that's true.

"Fine, then is he the boy who had you sitting on the roof feeling sorry for yourself?" his voice has done that thing where it gets all low and macho and stupid.

"I already told you I don't need you to beat anyone up for me," she says wearily.

"Mary."

"Oh honestly," she comes to a stop, turning to face her brother and causing the people walking behind them to grumble as they're forced to maneuver around them. "No, he isn't. I broke up with him. We're honestly very good friends when he isn't being an idiot. He has a boyfriend now anyway so."

There is the chance that maybe she shouldn't have said that.

She watches her brother's eyes go wide. "He has..."

Mary's gaze hardens. "Yes. Is that going to be a problem for you? Because if it is you can fuck right off."

He's still staring at her in shock. "Er—no, I—no, not a problem. Just...surprised, I guess?" he passes his weight back and forth between his feet, hand rubbing at the back of his neck. Uncomfortable. "Is that—er—common, with Wizards?"

Mary arches her brow. "Are you suggesting only Wizards are gay?"

Damian laughs a little, though it's still laced with nerves. "No, no I'm not."

Her eyes narrow. "I mean it Damian, if you're going to make this into a thing—"

"I'm not," he cuts her off. "I'm not I swear, I've just never met anyone who's...y'know..."

"Gay?"

"Sure."

She gives him another once over. "Statistically that's unlikely, but they're not going to be all over each other or anything so you really don't need to worry about it."

Her brother nods. "Right. Okay. Yeah. Cool."

"Cool," Mary repeats mockingly before she starts walking again.

The silence between them lasts for about a block before Mary gives in. "Are you seeing anyone?" she asks, imagining the answer is 'no' since he's out with his little sister on New Years Eve.

"Nah, there...there was for a bit but, not anymore."

She looks over at him. "What happened?"

He shrugs. "She wanted to keep her options open and I...didn't," he gives her a self-deprecating smile.

Mary snorts. "Obviously she didn't deserve you then."

"I'm not sure that's true," Damian says, smiling a bit more genuinely. "But it's nice to hear you say it."

Mary knocks her shoulder into his. "Anytime."

The silence returns, except this time Mary can feel the glances that Damian keeps sending her way. It's work for her not to roll her eyes. She knows exactly where this is going.

"Mary, are you okay?"

She really wishes people would stop asking her that. It's such a ridiculous question, as if anyone can ever answer it truthfully.

"Absolutely," she says, but she doesn't look at him, doesn't need to know that he's making that dumb expression he does when he's concerned—all furrow browed and sad-eyed.

"You can tell me you know," his voice drops, growing softer, reminding her of the way he used to talk to her after a nightmare or when their dad would put on a scary movie.

"Sure."

The concerned furrow doesn't go away. In fact he goes so far as to reach out, squeezing her arm. "Mary—"

But he's cut off by someone else calling her name:

"Mary!"

Both of them follow the voice to a small group of awkward looking Wizard teenagers leaning against a closed storefront across the street. Mary smiles. It's only been a week but she realizes as soon as she sees them that she's missed these lunatics.

Marlene launches herself at Mary the second she's close enough, causing the pair to stumble into the road laughing as Mary does her best not to lose her balance.

"HAPPY CHRISTMAS!" her best friend shouts in her ear, clearly already intoxicated.

"A few days late but your enthusiasm makes up for it," Mary laughs, giving her a kiss on the cheek as the freckled blond pulls away, eyes falling on her brother.

"Oh my God, what's up Damian!"

He smiles at her, the pair performing some weird handshake they developed years ago that Mary has always disliked. Firstly, because handshakes are tacky and secondly, because Damian needs to go find his own best mate and leave her's alone thank-you-very-much.

"Hey," Lily says, laughing a little as she gives Mary her own, slightly less aggressive, hug.

"How much has she had?" Mary asks in a low voice.

Lily's green eyes sparkle. "Only two glasses of wine I swear."

Mary rolls her eyes. "Bloody lightweight."

"I can hear you!" Marlene sing-songs from beside them.

"Good," Mary says over her shoulder.

Marlene sticks out her tongue at her.

"How's it going Macdonald?" Sirius grins from where he's leaning against the wall, ankles crossed, Remus on one side of him and James on the other, with Peter standing just a step behind.

"Happy New Years Mary," Remus adds.

"What Moony said," James smiles, stepping forward to give her a one armed hug. She tries to push down all the things she has to say to him. All the things she's been stewing over for the last few days. This is not the time. Not yet anyway.

“Good to see Lily was able to reach you,” she says to him, enjoying the way Lily’s cheeks flush.

James just looks confused. “Why wouldn’t she be able to reach me?”

But Mary waves the question away, turning back to the group at large.

“Alright children,” she holds up her purse. “I brought presents.” She pulls out the stack of ID cards.

“Santa is that you?” Sirius asks, earning him a snicker from James and Peter and an elbow from Remus.

“You betcha baby,” Mary gives him a wink as she starts handing out cards, noticing that Damian very purposefully looks away, like if he doesn’t see the ID’s he can pretend he didn’t stand by and allow their underage shenanigans to take place. She supposes she should be grateful he didn’t just run and tattletale the minute she told him the plan.

“Hey Mary?” Remus asks quietly when she passes him his card.

“Mm?”

He nods his head in Damian’s direction. “Who’s he?”

She looks over at him like she’d forgotten he was there. “Oh, that’s my older brother—DAMIAN!” she shouts, causing him to look up from his conversation with Marlene and Lily.

“Jesus Mary, spare our eardrums would you?” Sirius mutters.

“This is Remus, Sirius, James and Peter,” she points out the Marauders to her brother, “And you lot, that’s Damian.”

The boys all nod at one another and Mary can tell by the way that Damian’s eyes roam over them that he’s trying to figure out which one of them is Mary’s ex. She has no intention of helping him out, it’s much more fun to watch him guess.

“Alright, now that we’re all acquainted, lets get drunk yeah?”

“Here, here!” Sirius calls out, arm swinging around Remus’s shoulders as he pulls away from the wall, Marlene grabbing hold of Mary’s hand while Lily very subtly maneuvers her way to James’s side. Mary feels her chest fill with an unfamiliar fuzzy feeling, so unfamiliar that it takes her a while to figure out what it is:

Love.

She loves them.

All of them.

As stupid and ridiculous and useless as they all are.

Marlene elbows her as they walk up to the club. “What’s that look for?”

Mary shakes her head, “What look?” she demands automatically.

Marlene scrunches up her nose, pointing an accusing finger in Mary’s face. “That one.” Mary playfully slaps her hand away.

“Didn’t anyone ever tell you it’s rude to point?”

Marlene grins, somehow bringing out the freckles on her cheeks. “Nope.”

“Figures.”

But Marlene continues to ‘scrunch’ at her. Eventually Mary lets out an exaggerated sigh.

“It’s nothing, I just...think I’ve spent too much time with Lily. She’s made me all sentimental.”

Marlene laughs. “Oh no, what a tragedy!”

“Tell me about it.”

“Well, when we get inside I’ll buy you a drink to dull the pain.”

Mary grins at her. “You better.”

The club is everything Mary had wanted. Loud and dark and crowded. She is drenched in sweat within ten minutes of being inside, drinks sloshing around, glasses littering the floor where people have casually dropped them or knocked them from their tables. There is one almost constantly in her hands, the cold feel of the glass and the burning of the alcohol down her throat making her feel settled for the first time in ages.

They find themselves a booth somehow, tucked away in a corner, with ripped pleather seats and an unstable wooden table covered in years of sharpie—like a bathroom stall—people have written names and quotes and bits of gossip. Stuck stickers of bands and political slogans all over it.

Somehow, using her magical drunken wiles, Marlene has managed to drag Damian, Lily and James all out onto the dance floor, giving Mary an unsubtle wink as she knocks James into Lily. Mary snorts.

It isn’t until they’re the only ones left that Mary realizes there is something wrong with Remus. He sits stiffly, flinching whenever anyone slides in or out of the booth or when the beat in a song is particularly loud. The club is dark but not so much that she can’t see the exhaustion in his eyes or the worry in Sirius’s. It’s odd to see Sirius acting so—there’s no other word for it—mothering. He hovers over Remus, barely taking his eyes off him, though whenever he catches anyone looking he shoots them a sly grin or a wink. Makes some offhanded joke.

Eventually, and reluctantly, Sirius gets up to use the loo, at which point Mary downs the rest of her drink and scoots around the booth to take his place beside Remus—since speaking across the table is nearly impossible with the music.

“Hello,” Remus says, his smile is, at best, delicate.

“Remus,” she says, “I don’t want you to take this the wrong way, but you look terrible.”

A laugh that seems to surprise him falls out of his mouth. “Yeah, I know. I was hoping...” but then he cuts himself off, shaking his head and looking down at his glass.

Mary stares at him for a moment before deciding to press forward. “You can leave you know? You and Sirius. I won’t take it personally I promise. I’ll even make sure James gets back to you in one piece.”

Remus grimaces running his finger through the water rings left on the table. “He was so excited,” Remus’s voice has gotten significantly quieter, forcing Mary to bend her head closer to hear. “He’s never been to a Muggle club before, heard about them in songs though, in books, in movies. He forgot—” but Remus abruptly cuts himself off, growing stiff.

Mary doesn’t speak this time, instead waiting for Remus to take up the story again. And he does. Eventually.

“I told him to come without me,” Remus sighs, “when I started feeling...sick. But he—he wouldn’t. Said he’d stay behind,” Remus laughs, running a hand over his face “Said he had to kiss me at midnight.”

He sighs heavily before reaching for his glass and downing the rest of it. Mary waits for a few seconds, making sure Remus is done talking before she starts.

“So you decided to come even though you’re obviously in pain, because Sirius wouldn’t come without you?”

“More or less.”

She lets out a breath. “Jesus, you two are a fucking toothache aren’t you?”

Remus looks at her, brow raised in question.

Mary smiles. “Too sweet.”

He rolls his eyes. “More like dysfunctional.”

But she dismisses that with the wave of her hand before leaning forward again, careful not to brush against him. “Listen, Remus, there will be other nights and other clubs. Has it ever occurred to you that however excited he might have been, being with you matters more to him?”

“I just...” his mouth struggles to form the words. “I’m worried I’m going to hold him back. Worried he’ll start to resent me. That he already does.”

If it wasn't for the fact that she was certain it would cause him actual physical harm, Mary would have taken him by the shoulders and shaken him.

"Resent you for what Remus?"

He shrugs, swallowing with difficulty. "For all of it. For being me."

"For being you?"

He nods and then, running a hand through his hair; "For being a boy. Other things too but that...it's...harder for him to accept. And he wouldn't have to if it wasn't for me. He could just be...God, I don't know, normal."

"Normal," Mary repeats, like it's a dirty word. "Remus, you do realize, as gorgeous and lovely as you are, that you did not turn Sirius gay, right?"

Remus huffs out a laugh. "Yeah, I know, just sometimes it feels a bit like...I put him in this position. Forced him to make these choices. Cause we were mates first and he was afraid he was going to lose that and it's—it's really important to Sirius you know? With his family and all. Friends are really important to him. And so yeah, maybe he would have still been attracted to boys every once and a while with or without me, but he could have ignored that."

Mary opens her mouth to object but Remus cuts her off.

"I'm not saying it would have been healthy, I'm just saying he would have had the option to act on it or not. And it's like I took that away from him. Because if he didn't act on it he was going to lose something else. Another family. So in a way I forced him to do this thing that maybe he never would have done otherwise." He laughs then, swiping a hand over his face. "Sorry, I'm rambling."

There is honestly so much to unpack there that Mary isn't at all sure where to start.

"Look, Sirius is fucked up," she says bluntly, going on before Remus can protest. "And that isn't your fault. It's his parents' fault, it's, you know," she waves her hand in the air, "society's fault. People suck, generally, they think a lot of stupid things and then feel the need to force those stupid thoughts on other people. That isn't your fault either. But that kid," she points after Sirius, "looks at you like the world starts and stops with you. Looks at you like he's never seen anything so beautiful. Looks at you like he can't believe you're real."

Even in the dark she thinks she can see Remus blush.

"There are people and things he might grow to resent, but you're never going to be one of them. I promise you."

Remus lets out a heavy breath, leaning back in his seat before shaking his head, a rueful smile twisting his mouth. "Thanks," he says. "That—I—thank you."

She nods. "No problem."

He gives her an apologetic look. "Sorry this—this is weird right? Considering..."

It takes her a moment to realize what he's referring to. "Considering I used to shag him?" she asks, unable to keep the smirk off her face.

Remus blushes again. "Er—yeah."

Mary only shrugs. "Not really no."

"Oh," Remus nods even though he clearly does not understand. "That's...good."

"Macdonald," they both look up as Sirius comes swaggering back to the table, eyebrow arched. "Trying to take my place?"

"Please, as if I have to try." Still, she slides out of the booth, not bothering to sit back down once Sirius has retaken his spot at Remus's side.

"I think I'm going to go find the others, do try to break a few public decency laws while I'm away."

Sirius laughs out loud while Remus's blush intensifies, causing Mary to leave the table feeling distinctly satisfied with herself.

It doesn't take her long to find the others. Marlene with a drink she definitely doesn't need, Damian and Lily apparently having an embarrassing dance moves competition. Lily currently performing a very enthusiastic 'sprinkler' which is quickly followed by her brother's version of the robot.

"Where's James?" Mary has to practically snog Marlene's ear in order to be heard over the music.

The other girl shakes her head, and then: "He said he needed some air!" she shouts.

Mary nods, sparing no more look for her brother and Lily before pushing back through the crowd. She tries not to flinch at all the bodies and hands brushing against her, pulling on her, tries to stop constantly checking over her shoulder like she's going to find someone there, watching her. Hunting her. It's hot and loud and despite the room being large the crowd sucks up all the space. She doesn't blame James for needing a break.

She stumbles out into the cold without her jacket, the wind feeling nice on her sweaty skin, though she has a feeling that's going to change soon. She stands in the middle of the pavement, directionless, until she sees a shaggy haired boy a block away, sitting with his back pressed to the bar and his head tilted towards the sky.

"You look miserable," she says as she sits down next to him. Fuck the pavement is cold.

He huffs out a laugh that freezes in front of his mouth, drifting off into the night. "I'm not," and then, closing his eyes, he says it again; "I'm not." Mary isn't sure who it is he's trying to convince. "It's the alcohol," he goes on eventually.

Mary gives him a skeptical look. “You look miserable not drunk.”

The corner of his mouth twitches up in a pathetic imitation of his smile. “Yeah well,” as though that’s any kind of answer.

Mary, quite frankly, doesn’t have the patience for this.

“Regulus Black,” his eyes snap open, head turning towards her. “Explain that one to me would you?”

“Mary—“

She holds up her hand. “If you’re about to tell me you don’t know what I’m talking about I will be forced to punch you in the face.”

He lets out another disbelieving laugh, running a hand over his quickly flushing face. It’s a few seconds before he speaks. “Did he...tell you?”

She arches her brow. “You told me.”

James, bless him, looks genuinely confused. “What—I didn’t.”

“Sweetheart,” she says patronizingly. “You practically begged me to help him.”

James opens and closes his mouth, something helpless in his eyes before he drops his head back against the wall and looks up. “Did you tell him?”

“Yeah.”

James closes his eyes again. “Was he angry?”

She watches him, the tension in his shoulders, the corners of his mouth. He’s nervous, she realizes, afraid that he did something to upset Regulus. Regulus Fucking Black.

“No,” she says finally. “He wasn’t angry.”

James gives a small nod, still without opening his eyes. Mary waits another minute before pressing on.

“You really care about him?”

James’s mouth forms another sad smile. “I really do.”

“He what has you out here being miserable?”

James lets out a shaky exhale, the cold starting to bite at Mary’s skin.

“I’m scared for him. And I also just...I miss him. Fuck, I miss him all the time. It’s this clawing feeling in my chest, like there’s some monster in me that never settles unless he’s nearby. Unless he’s touching me. Talking to me.”

“Monster sounds about right.”

James hisses like she’s burned him. “Don’t Mary.”

“Don’t what?” she demands, a little more harshly than she intended. She had promised herself she would be gentle with him.

“I’m not going to listen to you talk shit about him.”

“Oh? Am I supposed to have nice things to say about him?”

He swallows, shaking his head. “You don’t even know him.”

“No? What about Sirius? Does he know him?”

“Don’t.”

Mary scoffs, looking out at the road and trying to quell the trembling anger under her skin. “Has it ever occurred to you that you might be thinking with your dick right now?” she says biting.

James doesn’t get louder, if anything his voice gets quieter and quieter. “I love him Mary,” he practically whispers. Like that means anything.

“You were in love with Lily not too long ago if memory serves.”

“I wasn’t—what does that even—“ he laughs, but it isn’t the warm sound it usually is. “I don’t even know what to say to that Mary.”

“Just because you think you’re in love again doesn’t mean—“

“Oh fuck you,” he gets up but doesn’t head back inside, just takes a few steps forward before turning back to her, the moon behind him. It’ll be full tomorrow. “I don’t think I’m in love. I am in love.”

“Oh so this time you’re sure are you? This time it’s the real deal?”

James grits his teeth. “Yes.”

“Why?” Mary pushes, getting to her feet too. “Because it’s reciprocated? Is that the only difference James? He sucks your cock and you suck his so you think that it’s love?”

“Fuck. Off.”

But she isn’t done. A bit because she’s angry. A bit because she’s scared. Scared for him. Scared of losing him. Scared of hurting him. “What if Lily had wanted you? Huh? Do you think you’d still have ended up doing whatever the hell it is you’re doing with Regulus Black?”

That pulls him up short, indignation and shock battling it out across his face. “W-what? What are you even talking about?”

“What if Lily had wanted you back?” she asks again, voice lower. This is it, this is her ace. Her card to play. To win the game. To keep James safe. Because maybe if he has Lily it won’t hurt so bad to lose Regulus. Because maybe if he never stopped loving her that means that Mary was right to trust him. That he is the person she’s always believed him to be. Because maybe she can fix this. This one thing. Her head is fucked, her future uncertain, but this one thing—this she can put to rights. Because Lily and James were always meant to be weren’t they? Isn’t that the world they had all been living in? Before Death Eaters and Dark Lords and Blood Purity.

“I don’t know, it doesn’t matter,” he runs a hand through his hair, his teeth starting to chatter. Mary had almost forgotten about the cold.

“Doesn’t it?”

He looks at her almost like he’s afraid. “What the fuck are doing Mary? What kind of game is this—are you drunk?”

“She wants you James.”

He instantly takes a step back, eyes wide. “Stop it.”

“She does though, she wants you too. You don’t have to...do this.”

“This?”

“You can’t love Regulus—you just—you can’t,” she can hear the desperation in her voice but she’s not sure that James can.

“I can’t?” he almost growls. “Jesus Mary, I don’t even—I do. I do. I love him. I’d fucking die for him—“

“But would he die for you?” she cuts him off. “Huh? Would he die for you? Because I bet you he wouldn’t. I bet you he’d sell you out the first chance he got.”

She sees it, right there in the whites of his eyes, sees the flicker of doubt, even while he fights to snuff it out.

“You have no idea—“

“I have some idea of what Regulus Black is capable of actually.”

It can’t be more than a few seconds that they stand there in silence, the weight of Mary’s words dragging them down. It feels like longer though. Hours. Days. Years. She watches the confusion and fear and horror all flickering across his face.

“What—“ he has to stop, the word coming out choked. “What do you mean?”

Mary holds his gaze. Even when it hurts. “I lied.”

“You lied,” he repeats, voice hollow.

James has a right to know. To know what he’s doing. Who he’s with. Because if he does—if he did—he would never choose Regulus. He couldn’t. Not James. James of all people.

“He was there.”

James takes another step back. “No. That’s not possible. He was with me.”

“The whole night?” she asks, relentless. He has to face this. Surely it’s only fair?

James has gone pale—almost frighteningly so.

“Don’t do this Mary, don’t do this just because you don’t like him, because you want me to walk away. Don’t do this.”

“I’m just telling you the truth.”

James shakes his head. “No. No, because you told me—because you told me what happened, what happened to you,” his words are falling out of his mouth, tripping over one another. “And Reg would never let that happen—would never stand by and let them...he just, he wouldn’t.”

Ten.

Funny, it reminds her a bit of Regulus, that night in the Quidditch stands. His vehement denial that she had been raped because he had stopped it. He had stopped them.

Nine.

Eight.

“He was there,” she says again. “He brought me to the infirmary, he tried to erase my memories.”

Seven.

Six.

James is still shaking his head, still walking backwards, away from her. He’s halfway into the street at this point. Mary is vaguely aware that people have started counting around them—voices echoing in the background.

Five.

“STOP.”

Four.

Three.

“You don’t love him James,” she says confidently. “You don’t. Not really. You can’t, not someone like that—someone who would do something like that. You don’t love him like you love Lily.”

Two.

“I DON’T WANT LILY!”

One.

“Oh.”

Both of them swivel around as cheers and fireworks and crashing bottles irrupt around them.

Just a few paces away Lily stands by the door looking slightly shellshocked.

“Er—I—“ she shakes her head. “I was supposed to find you for the countdown,” she swallows waving at the air. “Anyway I—um—I’m gonna go now, yeah?” She nods to herself. “Yeah. Okay.” And with that she stumbles back inside, both James and Mary frozen in place.

“Fuck,” James hisses under his breath, running a hand over his face.

“Yeah,” Mary agrees, fairly certain that Lily won’t be forgiving her for this anytime soon. “I —“

“Don’t,” James growls. “Don’t talk to me right now. Just...don’t.”

He starts moving towards the door, leaving Mary feeling equal parts guilty and angry. She chooses to focus on the latter, easier that way.

“You can be mad at me all you want,” she shouts after him. “It doesn’t change what I said. Doesn’t change that it’s true.”

James doesn’t stop. Doesn’t look back, storming inside to do God knows what. There’ll be no talking to Lily, not tonight. Maybe not ever. Mary stumbles backwards until she hits the wall behind her, sliding back down onto the ground.

She needs to get a grip—her head is buzzing with hands and faces and laughs that cut like blades. She sees Mulciber. Sees Snape. Sees Regulus. She still can’t find Barty’s face—like her brain won’t let her get that far, won’t let he remember that much. His touch. His weight. His smell. She remembers all of that. But she never sees his face. Probably thanks to Regulus fucking Black.

He went in her fucking head. He took the truth from her—took moments of her life. And now her word means nothing. Her truth means nothing. Fuck him. Fuck him for thinking he had the goddamn right. For thinking one violation was worse than the other. Fuck her stupid head for not being strong enough to keep him out. To keep any of them out.

Her face is in her hands, nails digging into her skull, breaths coming in short little gasps. She should stop thinking about this. She knows that. But the world around her is all noise—all shadows and voices she doesn't recognize. Which is what it feels like in her head most of the time these days. She just keeps seeing them. Keeps feeling their hands. Hearing their laughs. They fucking enjoyed it. What they did to her. They fucking enjoyed every goddamn minute of it.

“Mary?”

She's barely able to hear her name over the rest of it.

“Hey—hey, oh, hey, are you okay? Mary?”

Someone is sitting next to her, someone has their arm around her shoulders pulling her into their chest. Someone who smells like rooftops and home cooked meals.

Damian.

She doesn't realize until his arms wrap around her that she's crying—sobbing more accurately. She hasn't cried in ages. Didn't when she woke up in the infirmary with a splitting fucking headache and no idea where she was. Or when the nightmares started. Or when she pieced together what really happened to her. So she has absolutely no idea why she's crying now. Why she can't stop.

“Sh, sh,” Damian says, rubbing soothing circles into her back. “It's okay. It's gonna be okay.”

For some reason that just makes her cry harder.

Once she's able to stop long enough to speak she'll blame it on the alcohol. Damian will believe her. Or at least he'll pretend to, and soon enough she'll be back at school and she won't have to see the pity in his eyes every time he looks at her.

“What is it Mary? What's happened? I know this isn't about some boy, I don't even know why I said that, I was just trying to get you to talk to me. I just want you to talk to me. Let me help. What's wrong? What's happened?”

And of course she can't tell him. She can't really tell anyone. The only person she did tell was James and it turns out he's in love with one of the people who put her here so that shows how bloody good her judgement is. Fuck James too. God, he's so good at acting like the nice guy but he's just like the rest of them. Another privileged goddamn Pureblood who has no idea what it's like. What this feels like.

“Mary,” her brother says softly, and she knows she has to speak, even though it feels impossible in that moment. Knows she has to tell him something. Knows it has to be true.

“I'm scared,” she manages to sob into his shirt. “Fuck, I'm so goddamn scared. All the time. I don't—I can't—” she sounds pathetic, she recognizes that. Definitely planning to blame it on the alcohol.

“Scared of what?”

How can she even begin to explain? How can she articulate all the things crowding her chest and crushing her lungs and keeping her up at night?

She shakes her head against his chest. “Magic,” for some reason that’s the word that crawls out of her mouth.

It’s the thing that’s built this wall between her and her family. The thing that let a group of boys turn her body into something she can’t trust. The thing that’s painted a target on her back. The thing that at eleven years old made her feel invincible.

“I’m scared of magic.”

Chapter End Notes

Hey! Hi! Hello!

Idk, was this too slow? Did you like it? I kinda think I really like it but I always go back and forth.

This chapter is fully inspired by my belief that New Years Eve is the messiest night of the year.

Thank you so much for all your lovely comments and kudos I appreciate them so muuuucchhhh, they give me all the warm fuzzies!

Chapter 32

Chapter Notes

TW: Referenced Sexual Assault

French translations in the end notes

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

PART I: REMUS

It's always a bit awkward. Being a werewolf. Especially when you're a guest in someone's home and also about to transform into a monster. There's no polite way for someone to ask if they can please lock you in their basement now. Though the Potter's certainly try their best.

"You sure you don't want anything to eat?" James's mum asks as she places a set of folded sheets on the bed they've brought down for him. All the other furniture has been removed, but despite that the Potter's still have the nicest basement Remus has ever seen. Warm butter coloured walls, hardwood floors, exposed brick, a fireplace—currently disconnected from the Floo network and unlit—it's nothing like his basement back home. This room was made for games and movie nights and sleepovers. It makes Remus fidget. More acutely aware of how much of an imposition he's being. He should have gone home. Should have dealt with this himself.

"Remus?"

He looks up, finding Euphemia still standing by the bed, concern clear in her eyes even when she smiles at him.

"You okay kiddo?"

He nods stiffly, not bothering to bring up the aching in his bones or his head or the nausea that hasn't subsided since this morning. She knows all that already. Besides, it's not really what she's asking.

"I'm worried about the walls," Remus finally forces himself to say, hands shoved in the pouch at the front of his hoodie, eyes not meeting her's.

A wrinkle appears between her eyes. "The walls?"

"It'll—" he coughs. "I mean I'll," lets not shy away from it now Remus. "I'll scratch them up."

She arches her brow, looking a bit bemused. "Don't worry, honestly, it doesn't matter."

Remus swallows, throat dry, eyes trailing around the room, spotting all the places that photos and paintings have been removed. Pictures of James practically plaster the walls in this house. Remus doesn't know if his parents ever took any family photos. If they did they certainly never hung them up.

"There so nice though," he says eventually. Pathetically.

Euphemia makes a pitying noise that has Remus flinching. "Oh love," she's gentle when she wraps her arm around him, when she presses a kiss to the top of his head.

"Not as nice as you," she says, letting him go after a moment. "Besides, a wave of my wand and it'll all be good as new anyway, one of the many perks of being a witch," she gives him a wink.

Remus isn't sure if she's waiting for a response but he can't quite manage one.

"You're sure there's nothing else you need?" she asks eventually, standing by the bottom of the stairs.

He shakes his head. "No, thank you."

"Well alright then, we'll see you in the morning," she smiles. "Mimi's making pancakes." Remus does his best to smile back, he's not sure how well he manages it.

After she leaves he spends a long time just staring at the bed on the other side of the room, trying to imagine what he'd be doing tonight if he was normal. He'd probably be upstairs with James, Sirius and Peter, playing exploding snaps or chess. The other night, after Peter left and James fell asleep, Sirius dragged Remus outside and convinced him to ride on the back of his broom. Remus isn't overly fond of flying, but with Sirius's warm body pressed to his chest and the star filled sky wrapped around them, he couldn't help enjoying it at least a little. Afterward, they'd crawled back into bed, smelling like winter and laughter, and kissed until they'd fallen asleep.

He brings his hand to his chest like the ache there is a physical thing. After a few more seconds of sulking he sighs, walking over to the wall and sitting down on the ground, ignoring the bed. It reminds him too much of the shack. Maybe that should be comforting but it isn't. He folds his arms over his knees and rests his forehead on top...waiting.

That is, until he hears the door open. He doesn't lift his head right away, assuming it's Euphemia, that she must have forgotten something, or brought him some food even though he told her he wasn't hungry—mums never listen when you say you aren't hungry. But then:

"Hey Moons," comes a soft voice.

Remus instantly jerks upright, which hurts, a hiss escaping his mouth before he can stop it, the room spinning.

"Woah, you okay?" Remus can hear Sirius stepping forward even though the world remains too fuzzy to see. "You just got like three shades paler."

Remus has to squeeze his eyes shut, taking in a deep breath before opening them again.

“What are you doing here?” he whispers, the horror plain in his voice.

Sirius sits down in front of him, legs crossed. “D’you really think we were going to leave you down here alone?” he gives him a wink.

Remus’s mouth feels too dry. “It’s not safe,” not that it’s ever safe.

“I’ll transform when you do,” Sirius shrugs, like it’s no big deal. Which doesn’t sit well with Remus at all.

Mary thinks that Sirius is fucked up because of his parents. But sometimes Remus worries it’s because of him too. That Sirius can act so casually about his—about Remus turning into a werewolf—it isn’t...normal.

“The Potters?” he finally manages to ask, eyes automatically going to the ceiling over their heads, like he can see Euphemia and Fleamont milling about above them.

“James is covering for me,” Sirius says. And when Remus can’t muster another reply he reaches out, softly taking Remus’s hand and squeezing. “It’ll be okay.”

He wants to believe him.

“You should transform,” Remus says on his next exhale, voice shaky. He should try harder to get Sirius to go but the truth is, he doesn’t want him to. Selfishly he’s glad. Glad that he’s risking his life to keep Remus company.

Merlin, he really is fucking him up isn’t he?

“We still have time,” Sirius says, his thumb making soothing circles against Remus’s palm. “How’re you feeling?”

Remus lets out something sort of like laughter. “Shitty.”

Sirius smiles. “Yeah, I figured.” Then, reaching behind himself with his free hand, he pulls a chocolate bar out of his back pocket. “I brought you something.”

Remus’s stomach simultaneously growls and lurches at the same time. “Oh,” he says.

“You don’t have to eat it now obviously,” Sirius slides it across to him. “But, just figured...” he shrugs.

Remus doesn’t know why he’s feeling choked up about a bloody chocolate bar. The Moon always makes his emotions go haywire. Though maybe it’s not the moon, maybe it’s that Sirius Black, who famously never thinks of anything or anyone but himself (and on occasion James), thought of Remus. Or maybe he’s just really happy there’s chocolate—it’s honestly hard to tell at this point.

“Thank you,” his words are barely audible.

Sirius smiles so brightly Remus almost has to look away. Almost. He's going to say something else, because there's always more to say with Sirius. He makes lists of all the things he wants to share with him—thoughts and ideas and jokes. He still hasn't decided which one of those things he's going to say when he opens his mouth, but it doesn't matter anyway because what comes out is a groan.

"Fuck," he curls forward, forehead pressed to his knees as a lancing pain shoots through his head. He feels like his skull is splitting apart.

"Where does it hurt?" Sirius asks softly, not sounding the least bit disturbed by the trembling mess Remus is quickly becoming. But then again, he's seen it all before. Something like embarrassment curdles in Remus's stomach but he pushes it down.

"Head," he manages to gasp. "Everywhere. But—mostly my head."

He isn't looking at Sirius. Isn't looking at anything. The idea of opening his eyes right now feels impossible. When Sirius reaches for him his hands are soft—gentle—Remus so lost in their touch that he doesn't realize what they're doing at first.

"Sirius."

"Sh, sh," Sirius murmurs, as he slides between Remus and the wall, fitting Remus between his legs before pulling him back against his chest. Despite himself Remus feels his body relax, sighing at the contact, at the feeling of being so completely and utterly held.

"It's not safe," he says half-heartedly into Sirius's neck. "We shouldn't be this close."

"We have time," is all Sirius says before his fingers come up and start expertly massaging Remus's temples.

Remus lets out a small noise of satisfaction.

"Good?" Sirius asks.

"Yeah, Merlin, where'd you learn to do that?"

He feels Sirius shrug behind him. "Looked it up."

Remus's eyes fly open—something he instantly regrets, immediately closing them again. Seeing is too hard right now. "You—you looked up head massages?"

Another shrug. "You get headaches a lot. Thought...least this was something I could do."

Remus feels his eyes start to burn. It isn't fair really, for Sirius to do this to him on a full moon when he's already a mess, barely able to string two thoughts together.

"Sirius Black, you're being very sweet for Hogwarts's resident bad boy."

Sirius laughs, a low rumble that's all chest, giving Remus goosebumps. "Don't tell anyone, wouldn't want to shatter the illusion."

“Your secrets safe with me.”

“Oh I know.”

And there’s more in those words than just a little witty banter.

A few minutes of silence pass, with Remus sinking further and further into Sirius’s touch. His fingers don’t stop the pain but they definitely help. All of him helps.

“Does talking make it worse or better right now?” Sirius asks eventually.

It’s Remus’s turn to shrug. “It’s fine. What’s up?” his eyes are still closed and he can hear the drowsiness in his own voice.

Sirius lets out a sigh. “Something’s going on between Mary and Regulus,” he says after a brief pause. That’s enough to get Remus’s eyes open again, though he doesn’t move, not even when Sirius goes on: “And I think James knows about it or—I don’t know—is involved in it somehow.”

Well. Remus hadn’t seen this coming.

“Um...why do you think there’s something going on?” he asks tentatively.

Sirius sighs again. “Walked in on them having some sort of secret conversation that was either Mary propositioning him or threatening his life. It was honestly hard to tell.”

Despite himself Remus laughs. “Sounds like Mary,” Sirius makes a noncommittal noise of agreement. “James wasn’t there though?” Remus clarifies.

Sirius’s nose tickles the back of his neck when he shakes his head. “No, Mary just...just said I should ask him if I wanted to know more.”

Damnit Mary.

Remus swallows with difficulty. “And—er—have you? Asked James I mean?”

“No,” another pause. “He’s been in a shitty mood.”

Remus scrunches up his face—which actually hurts right now. “Since yesterday you mean? I noticed that too. Lily was also acting weird.”

Sirius blows out a breath that tickles Remus’s neck. “Nah, he’s been in a shit mood since we left school. Something’s going on with his boyfriend, and considering who he is—“

“You don’t even know who he is,” Remus interjects, mostly just to sooth his own anxiety, needing to hear Sirius confirm it.

He grunts, fingers stilling on Remus’s head, and it takes everything in Remus not to whine in protest. “I know he’s a Slytherin, which is enough,” and then; “You could tell me you know.”

“I can’t actually.”

“Remus—“

But he makes a protesting noise, burying his face in Sirius’s chest. “You’re making my headache worse.”

Sirius scoffs, sounding more fond than annoyed. “Pulling the full moon card are you?”

“It’s not a card,” Remus says, voice slightly muffled by Sirius’s shirt.

“No,” Sirius agrees softly, hand travelling from his temples to his hair, which Remus can’t complain about. “Do you think he’ll tell me if I ask?”

Remus presses further into him, hating that he’s lying to him right now. “If you ask who he’s seeing?”

“No,” Sirius huffs. “I’ve tried that, his valour is too bloody strong. But if I ask about Mary and Reg?”

Remus bites his lower lip, holding back a yelp as a hot streak of pain shoots through his back. It’s a few seconds before he can speak. “All you can do is ask,” is what he says, feeling like a coward.

“Yeah,” Sirius agrees, hand still carding absentmindedly through Remus’s hair. “I’ll ask when we get back.”

Remus nods, happy to put an end to this conversation. His whole body feels like it’s on fire even though he’s shivering. It can’t feel nice for Sirius, to be this close to him when he’s all sick and clammy, but he doesn’t pull away.

“You’ll have to let go of me eventually,” Remus says, not knowing why, since it isn’t at all what he wants.

“I know,” Sirius says, unconcerned. “You tell me when and I will.”

Like it’s simple.

“Thank you,” he hears himself say before he can help it.

Sirius is silent and Remus is pretty sure he isn’t going to respond, but then he bends down and kisses the top of Remus’s head.

“I’m always going to be here Remus, I promise,” he sounds like he means it. “I’m not doing you a favour I’m just...this is where I want to be, okay?”

I love you.

Remus thinks without meaning to.

Almost says out loud. But then another burst of pain explodes behind his eyes and he's forced to rip himself from Sirius's arms, falling forward onto his hands and knees. Breathing heavy and using all his willpower not to vomit.

"Remus?" Sirius asks gently.

"You should change," he chokes, and then—Merlin, it never gets easier, you'd think after all this time he'd have some way to manage the pain but—suddenly it feels like hooks have been stabbed through his torso and are being yanked in all different directions, pulling him apart. He thinks he starts screaming, but he can't be sure. Reality bends and twists around him. When he comes to again his sweaty forehead is pressed to the cold basement floor. Sirius whispering softly beside him, hand making soothing circles on his back.

"Change," he chokes. "Sirius, please. Please change now."

Sirius's hand stills, and then; "Okay."

Remus looks up, meeting his eyes for the first time all night, his breath catching the way it always does.

I love you, he thinks again. Hunched over on the floor, barely able to breathe. He watches Sirius's face disappear. Hidden behind fur. He almost says it out loud then—it's easier when he's a dog. Less scary. But before he can speak he's screaming. The sound of his back breaking filling up the room.

PART II: REGULUS

He goes back to school tomorrow. All and all it's been a rather uneventful visit. Everyone is busy. Except for Kreacher and his father, which, if Regulus is being honest, is exactly how he likes it. If it hadn't been for his run-in with Mary Macdonald he might even have enjoyed himself. As it is, he's been wracking his brain trying to figure out how to once again get out of doing the thing he's been telling himself he needs to do for months.

Is there something he can say—some way to phrase it—that won't send James running? That will make him understand.

Understand what?

Asks the cruel voice in his head.

That you're every bit the coward Sirius has always said you are? That you don't care much one way or the other, Death Eater or Mudblood, you just want to survive?

That you were trying to protect him. To keep him at arms length. But you've changed your mind?

Regulus shakes his head, trying to push all those thoughts out. They're pointless and unhelpful. He knows what will happen once James knows, regardless of the words he

chooses or excuses he makes. He's always known.

"Mon chou," his father's voice pulls him out of his thoughts. Regulus looks up from the book in his lap to find his father watching him with concern in his eyes. "What has you looking so upset, huh?"

Regulus can only hold his stare for so long before looking away. "I'm not upset." He grimaces at the high, tinny sound of his voice.

His father kisses his teeth, reaching over and lightly tapping under Regulus's chin, forcing him to look up. "Come now, no lying to your Papa."

Regulus rolls his eyes. "It's nothing—it's—just—school and—" he waves his hand in the air unable to say the rest of it. Even in this house, the one place that the Mark on his arm is something to be proud of, they don't really talk about it. About the people who have been coming and going and the meetings Walburga has been having. Nobody has said anything to Regulus—invited him to sit in or asked him how he's been forwarding their cause at Hogwarts. He's not sure how much longer his invisibility will last but he is grateful for it.

"There's something else," his father pushes, voice soothing as always, like waves against the hull of a ship or a breeze through the trees. Grimmauld Place hasn't been good for him—is it ever good for anyone?—he's paler and thinner than he was the last time Regulus saw him.

"You're afraid," it's not a question so Regulus doesn't answer. "Afraid of me mon cher? Afraid to tell me?"

Regulus swallows with some difficulty, looking away again, out the window. It's dark out, but then, it's dark inside too—the only real light coming from the fireplace. He can just make out the stars. Eyes automatically looking for Sirius.

There is a weight to his father's attention, he can feel it even if he can't see it. It's something he's always craved, though at this moment he would very gladly give it up. His father is waiting for an answer and honestly, Regulus isn't sure why he isn't just giving him an excuse. He has them, a dozen, a hundred—all saved up to pull out whenever anyone asks a question that cuts too close. His brain a catalogue of the different lies he needs to tell to get through the day.

"Regulus?"

He loves his father. Probably more than anyone else in the world. He loves his father and his father is dying. That's his excuse, for the words he lets out of his mouth. His chest. The box buried deep inside him. He loves his father. And his father is dying. And he just wants to know, before he loses the chance. He just wants to know if his father loves him back.

"I'm gay Papa."

He wonders if James would be proud of him—for saying it. Admitting it. His single act of bravery.

There's silence. Regulus doesn't take his eyes off the window, forces himself to focus on the stars outside, trying to figure out which ones they are. Trying to find himself. Sirius. Orion. Trying not to think about the slowly growing ache in his chest or the vomit inching up the back of his throat.

We'll always be together up there,

He tells himself, trying to calm his speeding pulse the same way he had when Sirius left.

Whatever else happens we'll always have that.

Eventually his father clears his throat and Regulus barely manages to suppress a wince.

"And that makes you upset?" Orion finally asks. Regulus has no idea what to do with that. He tries to dissect his father's tone but he can't tell if it's angry or bewildered or both.

He keeps his eyes on the window, afraid to find out for certain. "Doesn't it upset you?"

More silence. It goes on too long. Regulus should leave. He should leave. He has no idea what to expect, his mother has always been the one to punish him, he isn't sure what his father will do. Tell her—is the obvious answer. Just the thought makes him shiver. Fuck. This was a mistake. What did he think was going to happen?

"Mon chou—regarde-moi s'il-te-plaît."

Regulus's hands are trembling as he shakes his head.

"I'm sorry," the words barely audible. "I didn't want to let you down," it's easier to say it without looking. "I don't know why I'm like this. Why I can't ever seem to—do anything the right way."

"Non, Regulus, enough. Look at me please?"

Feeling like he might be sick he finally manages to turn his head. Instantly his father reaches out, taking his face in both hands.

"Regulus," he says softly, and for some reason that makes Regulus want to cry. "You are my son. You are the light of my life. The joy. I am stuck in this bed withering away but I die happy knowing that I gave the world you," his father's hands are shaking. "You are so beautiful my darling," he wipes Regulus's tears away with his thumbs. "You could never let me down."

All Regulus manages is a wobbly, "oh" before his father is pulling him closer, the book falling out of his lap as he steps towards the bed, allowing himself to be hugged.

"Je t'aime Regulus, toujours, toujours, toujours," he whispers in his ear.

Regulus tries to steady his breathing. Settle his nerves. "Thank you," he says, which makes his father laugh, pulling away just enough so he can hold his face again.

“I’m your Papa,” he says. “It’s my job.”

Regulus is grateful. So grateful. But he can’t help thinking of Sirius and wondering where this man was when Sirius needed him? As if hearing the thoughts in his head, his father’s expression shifts, becoming more serious.

“But Regulus, your maman—“

Now it’s Regulus’s turn to laugh, though perhaps a bit more bitterly. “No I won’t—I won’t tell her.”

His father nods, letting his hands fall away. And there it is, Regulus supposes, the answer to his question, the sin Sirius can never forgive. Because their father loves them. Just not enough to fight for them.

“Tell me,” his father smiles now, a mischievous look in his eyes, “is there someone special?”

Regulus’s throat grows tight. He should change the subject. He should lie. “Yes,” he says instead—daringly—toeing too close to the edge.

His father beams at him. “Is he very handsome?”

That manages to startle a laugh out of Regulus. “Yes,” he exhales, shoulders falling away from his ears. “Yes, very handsome.”

“And kind?”

Regulus’s chest squeezes and he wonders how his father—the man married to Walburga—can ask that question without choking. “Oui—yeah, he’s—yeah. I’ve never met anyone—“ he can’t seem to finish that thought, hand going to the base of his throat like he can free the words that have gotten stuck there.

His father tilts his head to the side. “What is it?”

Regulus just shakes his head. “Nothing, I’m being ridiculous.”

But his father reaches forward, squeezing his arm “We’ve come so far mon chou, no more lying, hmm?”

He wonders if his father realizes how ridiculous a request that is in this house. But he doesn’t argue. “I can’t have him,” he whispers.

He sees the understanding brighten his father’s eyes. “Ah,” he says, “well, there are ways to...accommodate such things.”

Regulus really does laugh now. “Are you suggesting he be my mistress?” the thought is so ludicrous and so addictive that Regulus can’t help imagining it, just for a moment. They could have a house, some place to meet, that was just their’s, that no one else would know about. It wouldn’t just have to be for a few hours either, they could get away for days, for

weeks even, at least every once and a while. Regulus squeezes his eyes shut, mentally shaking himself.

“I couldn’t,” he finally manages. “He would—he would never want that.” Regulus can’t quite believe he’s having this conversation. “He doesn’t want to love in secret. It’s not who he is. He’s too—too honourable for that.”

His father’s eyebrows raise to his nearly nonexistent hairline before Regulus realizes his mistake. “Love?”

He flushes, turning away.

“Oh mon cher, tu l’aime?”

“I think that’s enough truths for tonight.”

But when he looks back his father still wears an expression somewhere between fondness and pity. “L’amour est la lame la plus tranchante, n’est-ce pas? Une douleur que nous méprisons et désirons tout à la fois.”

Regulus rolls his eyes. “Enough Papa, I misspoke, don’t go making a whole thing of it.”

His father laughs, opening his mouth to speak when a loud crack draws both their eyes towards the door.

“Kreacher?”

The house elf fidgets, eyes larger than normal as he looks imploringly from one face to the other. “I am being very, very sorries sirs, but Madam has sent for Master Regulus.”

Regulus blinks. “Oh,” he gets up, Kreacher still looking unusually twitchy, “is that all?”

Kreacher dances from one foot to the other, one of his hands coming up to tug nervously on his ears. “She—she is not alone Master Regulus sir,” he makes a nervous humming noise that causes something to twist in Regulus’s stomach.

“Who is she with Kreacher?” he asks carefully.

Another whimper. “It—he is here. It’s him Master Regulus. He is here. In the dining room. He is...” the house elf shivers instead of finishing his sentence.

Regulus can relate, feeling something cold suddenly dripping down his own spine. “He,” Regulus repeats numbly. “You mean...”

Kreacher gives a jerky nod. “The Dark Lord is waiting sir.”

PART III: JAMES

So yeah, he's being a bit reckless. Or a lot. Definitely a lot. But Sirius and Remus are locked in the basement together and Peter went home and James just—he can't sleep. And he knows. Knows that he'll see Regulus tomorrow. Knows that he can't see him tonight. But he just... because he can't get Mary's words out of his head. He tried reading and rearranging the furniture in his bedroom before he gave up and went outside to fly laps around the back garden. Flying usually helps clear his head—or at least exhaust him—but this time it didn't. His mind was just so loud and so cluttered and there was no one around to stop him or distract him and then suddenly he wasn't flying laps around the back garden. He was flying to London.

So. Yeah. Bit reckless.

He's never been to Grimmauld Place per se, but Sirius has talked about it enough that James knows where it is. Well, he knows what street it's on, knows where it would be on the street if it didn't have whatever charms it does that are currently preventing him from being able to see it. So he's sitting in the park across the street, it's empty and dark, one or two street lamps flickering around him, broom clutched in his hand, fingers frozen, face numb.

It feels both worse and better, knowing that Regulus is right there. James hadn't been old enough or strong enough to save Sirius himself. To physically drag him out of this house. But he reckons he could do it now. He's older. Well. A bit older. Enough older. He reckons he would stand a chance, if he caught them by surprise. Or if could find Regulus's room, sneak him out the window. At this point he'd Body-Bind him and carry him out if he wouldn't come on his own. This has gone on long enough. James has already stood by helplessly and watched Walburga destroy one person he loves, he isn't doing it again. He isn't waiting until the moment she hurts Regulus so badly he can't recover from it. He's ending this now.

Or...he would be...if he could see the bloody house.

“Paranoid bitch,” he whispers under his breath which freezes in front of his mouth. It's bloody cold out, which is good, means there are fewer people. Fewer people to see him sitting suspiciously on a park bench all alone and fewer people to see him flying halfway across the country on a broomstick. He flinches thinking about that last one, really hoping that in the dark no one was able to spot him.

Okay Potter, he thinks, foot tapping impatiently on the ground as he continues to glare at a bunch of posh looking townhouses. What's the plan? We're here. We did it. So what's next?

He fiddles with the wand that's still half up his sleeve, turning it in between his fingers. Does he try a revealing spell? A summoning charm? What kind of magic makes a whole house disappear? And not in a “there's a big empty space here” kind of way, but in a “literally doesn't exist” kind of way.

“Are you lost little boy?”

James's foot immediately stops tapping. He knows that voice. Hasn't heard it in a while but...

“Narcissa?” his wand is now clutched more firmly in his hand as the blond haired witch walks toward him, dark cloak dragging behind her. She hadn’t been blond the last time he saw her but he’d been—what? Eleven? Twelve?

She stops in front of the bench he’s sitting on, cold eyes staring down at him. “What are you doing here Potter?”

He should really be doing something—like running. Flying. Moving in any and all directions that are away from her. And yet, for some reason, he finds himself frozen.

“D—do you live here?” he asks dumbly.

She arches her brow. “No. I’m visiting my aunt. Which brings me back to my original question: what are you doing here?”

James realizes he still doesn’t have an answer to that. “Visiting your aunt?” he offers up weakly, surprised when he sees Narcissa fight back a smile.

“Touché.”

“Bonjour?”

“Are you just saying random french words?” she asks.

“Isn’t that what you’re doing?” He’s overcompensating. When he gets nervous he gets cocky.

Narcissa snorts, running him up and down with her eyes. “I can see why Sirius likes you so much. You’re practically the same person.”

“I’m prettier though right?” his hand tightens around his wand, pulse beating a bit too fast.

Narcissa steps forward and James fights the urge to flinch away. “Did somebody send you here?” she asks, voice a low purr.

“No.”

“No?”

James shakes his head. “I swear.”

She steps closer, James considers pulling out his wand, considers aiming it at her. But then, that’s a stupid move unless he means to use it. And he’s not sure that he does. I mean, technically he can’t. And he isn’t entirely sure that the Ministry will side with him if he claims self-defence against Narcissa Black.

She tilts her head to the side. “Does that mean no one knows you’re here?”

James feels his whole body go tense. Because, yes. Yes, that’s exactly what it means. Narcissa clearly notices because she smiles. She’s beautiful in the way that all the Blacks are

beautiful. But she has none of warmth of Sirius or Regulus. Her eyes feel hollow. James doesn't like it. Doesn't think she laughs very much.

"Well isn't this a fabulous prize," she takes hold of his chin, jerking his head back so she can get a better look at him, forcing him more fully into the light of the street lamps. "Tell me, James, what do you think your father would give up to make sure you came home safe?"

James's heart starts pounding against his ribs. "What?"

"If I snatched you right now," her nails dig into his chin. "How far do you think he'd go to get you back, huh? Would he write a few new laws? Give up some names? Some hideouts? You're the only one right? The only child?" something flickers in her eyes, something vulnerable that James can't quite figure out. "They tried for a long time to have you, I remember the rumours. I don't think they'd let you go easily."

The last thing he ever wanted was to hurt his parents. He wonders if he could convince her that they have a strained relationship, that he really isn't worth much. He's not sure he could pull it off, so he stays silent. Eventually she lets him go.

"No one sent you," she says. "And my disaster of a cousin has already fled. So what, baby Potter, are you doing here? I'm honestly intrigued. What inspired this level of idiocy?"

James doesn't answer, wondering what she would do if he just jumped on his broom and took off. There would be plenty of time to hex him on the ascent—well, at least enough time. But would she? Out here in the street? How much control do the Death Eaters really have over the Ministry? Enough to overlook kidnapping? Is she bluffing? He can't tell. He looks at her and tries to crack open her expression but he honestly has no idea.

Fuck.

"Oi!" she snaps her fingers in front of his face, causing him to start. "Answers, now, or I'm getting Lucius."

And suddenly James goes very still.

He'd forgotten.

Forgotten that she isn't Narcissa Black. Not anymore. She's Narcissa Malfoy.

And just like that all his nerves and fear are burnt up by near unbearable rage. The desire to break Lucius Malfoy into a hundred little pieces.

"Do it," he growls, standing. He's taller than her, broader—he has quidditch to thank for that—forcing her to instantly step back.

Her eyes narrow, running him up and down—reassessing. "Do you know my husband?" she asks.

James gives his head a sharp shake. "We've never met." Which seems like the safest answer but it does nothing to dim the new curiosity in her eyes.

“There’s more.”

“Call him here—you bring him here.” James’s wand slides properly into his palm now, a movement that Narcissa doesn’t miss.

She watches his wand for a moment before her eyes come back up to meet his. “Has he done something to you? Your father?”

“You know what he’s done.” It’s a vague statement, it could mean anything, but it makes Narcissa’s eyes narrow further.

“He’s done many things. You’ll have to be more specific.”

“Where is he? The Ministry? Is he in there?” he jabs a shaking hand in the direction of the street, where he knows Grimmauld Place is even if he can’t see it. “Tell him I’m here, tell him I’m waiting. Lets see how much of a coward he really is, or if he has enough of a spine to pick up his wand.”

That startles a laugh out of her, “He’s not going to fight a child.”

“Oh so he’ll fuck kids but he won’t fight them?” He sees the minute she understands. It’s the same minute he realizes what he’s done.

“Regulus,” she whispers, taking a step back, eyes going almost unwillingly to the houses across the street like she can’t help herself. “He told you? He told YOU?”

James isn’t having this discussion. Especially not with Narcissa bloody Malfoy. “You get your fucking husband here now.”

There is no mask anymore, dozens of conflicting emotions splintering across Narcissa’s face. “Why? Why would he tell you? He hates you.”

James tries not to flinch. Tries not to care that that was probably true at some point. But then, you could say the same thing about him. He had hated Regulus hadn’t he?

“I don’t get it,” Narcissa mutters, clearly irritated by that fact.

“You don’t need to get it,” James pushes into her space again. Righteous indignation is a hell of a drug.

For the second time that night he sees something click in Narcissa’s eyes. “Oh shit,” she whispers under her breath. “Oh goddamnit Regulus. It’s you, isn’t it? Lucius has been banging on about Regulus having a boy. It’s you. James fucking Potter.”

I’m so sorry Reg.

“You knew didn’t you?” he goes on, because he’s already so far in, and there’s no way he’s leaving this conversation without hearing her admit it.

“Knew?”

“About Lucius,” the words are ground between his teeth, anger vibrating his bones. “You knew—not just after but during, didn’t you? Knew what he was doing and you did nothing. You married him.”

Narcissa at least has the decency to look ashamed. “We all pay a price to be part of this family.”

It’s so horrible that the only thing James can do is laugh. “That’s sick that is. That’s fucking sick. How can you live with yourself? He was a kid—he’s still a kid—how can you get in bed with that monster.”

“Oh don’t you moralize at me you fucking infant—like you have any idea how the real world works,” she shoves him back. “Human beings are disgusting and vile, either learn to live with it or, I don’t know, throw yourself off a cliff. Regulus hasn’t bled for this family anymore than the rest of us. He’ll get his reward in the end.”

It takes every ounce of self-control he possesses not to hit her. Not to throw her on the ground. “His reward?” his voice so tight it nearly snaps.

There’s a moment’s pause before she smiles at him, something vaguely sinister about it. Empty. “Oh haven’t you heard? We are chosen,” she opens her arms wide. “Our blood is pure, our magic is ancient. We will rule the world and crush the rest of you into dust.” The sleeves of her robe slip down, revealing two pale, naked forearms. No Marks to be seen. Somehow that makes her speech seem a little less sincere.

“Looking for something?” she snaps, bringing his eyes back to her’s. Her gaze a weird mix of anger and pain. Eventually—after too long, really—she drops her arms again. This time looking exhausted.

“Go, Potter. Go home. Now.”

James blinks. “I—what?”

“Get the fuck out of here,” she snaps.

James knows that he should take the out but he’s too bewildered by it to be relieved. “You’re just going to let me go?”

She glares at him. “This time. For Regulus. But if I see you sniffing around here again I promise I will lock you in the fucking basement, do you understand me?”

“For Regulus?” James says derisively. He knows he’s pushing his luck here but he can’t let it go. “Are you pretending you care about him suddenly?”

She gives him a cold look. “One day,” she says slowly. “You’ll understand that loving someone is a complicated thing,” he doesn’t appreciate the way her stare lingers on him. “One day real bloody soon.”

There’s a crack, which has James stumbling back into the tree behind him. He hadn’t been expecting her to Apparate. It takes him a minute to catch his breath, to be sure that she’s

really gone. His hands are shaking slightly when he grips his broom, throwing one leg over before casting a glance back at the row of houses across the street, like maybe suddenly he'll see it. He's so hopped-up on adrenaline right now that he's pretty sure if Grimmauld Place materialized in front of him he'd kick the door down. Consequences be damned.

Alas. There's still no twelve. The houses jumping from eleven to thirteen, with no space between.

"I'm sorry Reg," James sighs. "I hope you're safe. I'll see you tomorrow, yeah?" And then he kicks off, flying back into the night.

James is asleep almost as soon as he sits down on the train, slumping into the corner with his head pressed against the glass.

"Jesus," Sirius mutters. "You'd think HE was the one who turned into a bloody werewolf last night."

James doesn't open his eyes, just gives Sirius the middle finger and burrows further into his corner, using his jacket as a pillow. If Remus had been there he probably would have hit Sirius but he's already at the Prefect meeting. He'd looked surprisingly well for the morning after a full moon—it's obvious that having Sirius with him had helped.

James drifts in and out of consciousness, the light casting shadows through his eyelids as the train pulls through Scottish countryside. Every once and a while Sirius and Peter's mumbled conversations drift through the compartment but he's never awake enough to really understand what they're saying. He just wants to get back to school. He just wants to see Regulus. He isn't sure if Narcissa will have told him that James showed up at Grimmauld Place—if she did he'll be in for a dressing down but he doesn't care. Regulus can yell at him all he wants. Just as long as James can see him. Touch him.

The compartment door slams open, startling James upright and causing him to kick Peter in the process.

"Ow! What the hell Prongs," he rubs testily at his side.

"Sorry," James yawns, running a hand over his face before he looks up to find the cause of the disturbance. Remus is standing in the doorway, a grimace on his face.

"Finally finished with your official duties?" Sirius asks, tugging lightly on Remus's robes but Remus doesn't look down.

"James can you c'mere for a minute?"

"Er—" James's still half-asleep brain isn't quite able to process that request.

"You want to talk with him...in the hallway?" Sirius asks, clearly as confused by this as James.

“Yeah, ah, Lily has something she wants me to tell him, so—James?”

Sirius lets out a low whistle. “Shit, what’d you do Prongs?”

“I—“ he’d almost forgotten about Lily. Well, no, okay, that isn’t quite right. He hadn’t forgotten as much as he’d just been completely unable to process it. A lot had happened all at once.

“You aren’t really gonna make him go in the hall are you?” Sirius goes on, seemingly not expecting an answer from James. “You know he’s just going to tell me everything anyway.”

Remus rolls his eyes. “I promised Lily I would deliver the message privately, what he does after that is his own bloody prerogative. James? Please?”

James finally manages to get to his feet, fighting with Sirius on his way out the door as the other boy tries to trip him, Sirius laughing as the compartment door slides shut behind them.

James huffs, straightening out his shirt and staring at Remus. “Well, what—“

But Remus shakes his head. “Not here,” he hisses, before he starts walking quickly along the train. James has no idea what to do other than follow him. They’re nearly at the end of the car before Remus turns into another compartment—an empty one, James realizes.

“Moons?” he asks, stepping inside and watching Remus shut the door behind them before casting a Muffliato.

Remus sighs, bringing his hands to his face and then wincing when his fingers drag across the still fresh cuts. James waits for him to speak but he doesn’t, just stands there looking like he’d rather be anywhere else.

“Okay, Remus? You’re starting to scare me now.”

He sighs again. “Sorry, sorry I just don’t know how to…” he trails off. “Maybe you should sit down?”

James arches his brow. “Is this really about Lily?”

Remus shakes his head. “Though I do think you’re going to have to talk to her at some point because there was definitely something…off, today. You never said what happened on—“

“Moons,” James interrupts. “You’re rambling, and as much as I would love to listen to you for hours I’m gonna need you to tell me what’s going on.”

“Right,” Remus nods. “Yeah, of course, sorry.”

They go back to standing in silence.

“Moony?”

His eyes flutter closed for a minute, and James watches him take a deep breath before he opens them again, a new determination in his eyes. “It’s Regulus, James.”

Which may be the most terrifying sentence James has ever heard, his stomach instantly dropping into the soles of his shoes.

“What’s Regulus? What do you mean?” fear is plain in his voice but James makes no attempt to hide it.

Remus looks at him sympathetically. “He isn’t—he didn’t come back.”

“What?”

Something cold cascades down his spine, pools in his chest. He’s going to be sick. Going to pass out.

“That’s not—how—are you sure?”

Remus nods slowly. “He wasn’t at the Prefect meeting so I asked Cerci Greengrass. She said he never showed up. That she went looking for him but Barty and Rosier haven’t seen him either. Don’t seem to know where he is. Or if they do they wouldn’t tell her.”

James shakes his head. “No.”

No.

No.

No.

“James?”

Black spots have started appearing in his vision. What if Narcissa went to Walburga? Went to Lucius? What if this is his fault?

“James? James breathe—fuck—breathe.”

He feels Remus’s hands on him, feels himself being guided into one of the seats, his head pushed gently between his knees.

“I—can’t—I have to go—I have to go get him.”

He’d been right there. He’d been so close.

“You know you can’t.”

“No—please, please Remus. You have to help me. I can’t—I can’t leave him there. I can’t leave him with them. They’ll hurt him. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. This is my fault. This is my fault. I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry. I just wanted to keep him safe.” He really isn’t breathing anymore, words tripping out of his mouth tangled up in one another—all half sobs.

“James—God, James—It’ll be okay. We’ll figure something out, I promise. But right now I need you to breathe. Please, for me,” he feels Remus’s hand squeeze the back of his neck.

“In, out James. In, out.”

“I can’t. It’s my fucking fault. He told me to stay away and I didn’t. He told me what would happen if they found out and I told him I didn’t care. I can’t. I can’t.”

“Sh, sh,” Remus says calmly, hand still a steady weight at the back of James’s head. “Don’t go thinking up worse case scenarios okay? We don’t know what’s happened.”

James still feels like he’s choking on every inhale. “What if it was Sirius?” he whispers, feeling Remus stiffen next to him.

“I promise I’ll help you,” Remus says, barely louder than James. “I promise.”

James wants to tell him that he believes him but he can’t quite manage it. Eyes squeezing shut, head still between his knees.

I’m sorry, is all he can think. Over and over again.

I’m sorry.

I’m sorry.

I’m so sorry.

Chapter End Notes

** Mon chou = Sweetie / sweetheart

Mon cher = My dear

"Mon chou—regarde-moi s’il-te-plaît" = Sweetheart - please look at me

“Je t’aimes Regulus, toujours, toujours, toujours,” = I love you Regulus, always, always, always

“Oh mon cher, tu l’aime?” = Oh my dear, do you love him?

“L’amour est la lame la plus tranchante, n'est-ce pas? Une douleur que nous méprisons et désirons tout à la fois.” = Love is the sharpest blade, isn't it? A pain that we both despise and desire. **

(Oh my god so much french I'm so sorry)

Hello beautiful people!

I really like this chapter, I don't know why, I just do. All three parts just got me feeling some type of way y'know?

Anyway, I hope you like it too!

Thank you always!!!!

Chapter 33

Chapter Summary

Extreme Where's Waldo

Chapter Notes

Listen, I think I probably mess around with HP magic lore in this chapter and also maybe how Quidditch works buuuut I like it soooooo I'm keeping it

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

PART I: LILY

Lily isn't sad. Really she isn't. Not about James Potter announcing to half of London that he doesn't want her anymore. Or about Mary going behind her back and talking to him in the first place. Those things are stupid and silly and they don't matter. So she isn't sad about them. Not even a little bit. Not even at all. In fact, she's barely thought about either one of those people since New Years. So. There.

"Have you seen my Charms textbook?" Marlene asks when Lily emerges from the bathroom after taking a shower that was both too long and too hot. But not because she's sad.

"Um...no?" she very pointedly does not make eye contact with Mary.

"Goddamnit," Marlene is currently on her stomach, half under her bed, throwing random items into the middle of the floor in her frantic search.

"Mar dear," Mary says, sounding bored. She's perched in the window, inspecting her nails. "You do know you're a witch right? Just Accio that sucker."

The frantic searching stops as Marlene crawls back out from under her bed, sitting back on her heels, blond hair a mess. "Oh," she says a little breathlessly. "Yeah, right. Good call."

Lily finishes getting dressed as Marlene gropes around for her wand. "Shouldn't you two be at practice?" she asks, forcing her voice to sound casual. Because she isn't sad. So how else would her voice sound?

"No," Mary says tightly.

"James cancelled it."

Lily turns to face her roommates, directing her look of astonishment at Marlene specifically.

“I know,” Marlene says, shoving her newly found Charms textbook into her bag.

“Is he sick?” Lily asks, hating herself for caring.

“Merlin I don’t know,” Marlene runs a hand through her hair. “Remus says he isn’t but—cancelling practice? After the break? With Mary only just able to play again?” she shakes her head. “Something is definitely wrong. Has to be.”

Lily can feel Mary’s eyes on her but she refuses to meet them. She doesn’t think that this has anything to do with New Years—I mean, it can’t, right? Why would James be upset? Upset enough to cancel Quidditch? Even when he’d been fighting with Sirius he hadn’t missed Quidditch. She wonders if Mary knows but she doesn’t want to give her the satisfaction of asking. It isn’t that she hasn’t spoken to Mary at all since the break, she just hasn’t spoken to her much.

“Lily?”

She blinks, coming back to herself and finding both Marlene and Mary watching her. It’s clear that this is not the first time her name has been said.

“Alright?” Marlene asks tentatively.

Lily instantly nods, perhaps a bit too enthusiastically. “Yeah, yeah of course.” Neither of them look convinced but she doesn’t give them the chance to push the matter. “C’mon, lets go before we’re late for breakfast,” she throws her bag over her shoulder, moving for the door before either of them can answer.

James isn’t at breakfast. Not that Lily is looking for him. Not that she cares where he is or what he’s doing or if he’s okay. He doesn’t want her. That’s fine. Really. She’ll not want him back. Any minute now. She’ll not want him back so hard.

“Who are you looking for?” Marlene asks, causing Lily to start. She rips her eyes away from the end of the table where the other three marauders are sitting, excuse ready on the tip of her tongue. But when she looks at Marlene she realizes it’s Mary she’s talking to.

“No one,” Mary says casually, not looking nearly as guilty as Lily. Regardless both Lily and Marlene immediately try to follow her gaze.

“Slytherin? Are you looking at someone in Slytherin?” Marlene sounds slightly horrified. “Merlin Mary, please tell me you’re not hooking up with one of them? Diggory was bad enough.”

Mary snorts, turning her attention back to her breakfast. “No. I’m not hooking up with one of them.”

Lily waits for Mary to explain why then, she's staring so intently at the Slytherin table, but she doesn't. This is especially infuriating because Lily can't just ask her herself because she's not supposed to be talking to Mary right now, or at least not except when absolutely necessary. So she looks pointedly at Marlene, waiting for her to take on the burden of asking the obvious follow-up questions, but Marlene's attention appears to have already wandered.

"Oh hey!" Marlene waves at Dorcas Meadowes, her voice about two octaves higher and more chipper than it had been only thirty seconds earlier. "Hey, hi, good morning!" she keeps going, unnecessarily.

Mary snorts, rolling her eyes as Marlene nearly vibrates in the seat beside her.

"What'd you drink a whole vat of coffee this morning?" Mary asks. Marlene only elbows her as Dorcas reaches them.

"Hey guys," Dorcas looks a bit uncertain.

"Hi!"

"I think you've covered the greetings Mar," that comment earns Mary another elbow.

"Can I er—" Dorcas blushes as she mumbles, "is it alright if I sit here?"

"Yeah, of course!" Marlene is so eager Lily half expects her to pull out Dorcas's chair for her.

"Thanks," Dorcas smiles as she takes her seat. It's not that Dorcas never sits with them, it's just that she has her own group of friends. She's more of what Lily thinks of as a walk-by-and-wave acquaintance.

"How's it going Dorcas?" she asks, trying to get herself together. This morning has already been a lot and it's not even nine.

"Pretty good, you?"

Lily knows her smile is strained. "I'm excellent."

Mary does not bother to acknowledge that someone else has joined them. Well, at least not until Marlene kicks her under the table. Rolling her eyes at her best friend she offers Dorcas a sardonic look.

"Meadowes."

"Macdonald," Dorcas returns, looking like she's trying not to smile. When silence falls after that Dorcas clears her throat. "You guys have a good Christmas?"

"Brilliant Christmas," Marlene jumps in, clearly happy to have something to talk about. "Though to be fair I've never not had a brilliant Christmas, it's kinda my favourite time of year."

Dorcas smiles fondly at her and Lily is surprised to see Marlene's cheeks grow pink.

“Mine too,” Dorcas says.

Forgetting, momentarily, that she’s still angry at her, Lily makes eye contact with Mary across the table. It’s a sort of “are you seeing what I’m seeing?” kind of look. Or, perhaps more accurately a “is it just me, or does this feel like flirting?” kinda look.

“What’s your favourite part?” Marlene asks excitedly, eyes only for Dorcas. “Mine’s the food, obviously. My mum makes the best mashed potatoes.”

“Nah-uh,” Dorcas argues playfully. “My mum definitely makes the best mashed potatoes.”

Marlene grins, arching her brow. “Is that a challenge? You really think you could beat me in a potato off?”

Dorcas’s eyes sparkle. “Bring it on McKinnon.”

Lily isn’t sure what’s going on between Dorcas and Marlene. On the surface there’s nothing overly intimate about their conversation, it’s just small talk. But something about their little smiles and flushed cheeks charges the air with more. With something that makes Lily feel ... lonely.

“Sorry, I just remembered I forgot something upstairs,” she says suddenly, pushing away from the table and causing Marlene to look up from Dorcas for the first time. “I’ll just...” she gestures towards the doors, grabbing her bag and awkwardly walking away, “meet you in class.”

Marlene looks confused. Mary does not.

“Okay, see you?” she hears Marlene call after her as she speed walks towards the exit.

She still isn’t sad by the way.

That’s very important.

Or at least so she tells herself.

She isn’t sad about the way that Marlene and Dorcas were looking at one another, or the fast back and forth between them. Conversation coming so easily once it was started. She isn’t sad that the person she thought she had that same connection with doesn’t want her. And she certainly isn’t heartbroken.

Does it hurt that he doesn’t want you?

Asks the voice in her head.

Or that he used to, and you laughed in his face?

She grits her teeth.

Neither.

Neither hurts because she isn't sad. She isn't anything.

Lily forces herself to slow her pace, she's walking far too fast for someone who is trying to waste time. Of course, there's nothing she forgot upstairs and she's too lazy to go all the way back up the tower for no reason, so she decides she'll just take the long way to class. The beauty of going to school in a massive medieval castle is that it makes dawdling exceptionally easy. Lily knows for a fact that Mary used the moving staircases as an excuse to be late to Charms for almost a year before Flitwick finally caught on.

Running a hand across her face she lets out a heavy sigh. This is okay. She's okay. Everything is going to be fine.

"Bad morning?"

She swings around to find James bloody Potter hiding in the alcove of one of the windows. Because of course he is. Lily doesn't know what she did to piss off the universe this much but she's more than ready to sacrifice a goat or something and beg for forgiveness.

"What the hell Potter, are you trying to give me a heart attack?" she stutters, cheeks flushing with embarrassment like she'd just been caught doing something embarrassing. Which is stupid, especially since he's not even looking at her.

"Sorry," he says eventually, voice flat. It's not a tone that suits him.

For half a heartbeat Lily pretends that she's going to walk away. Whatever is going on with James Potter it's none of her business. For her own health she needs to stay as far away from this boy as possible. Yet somehow she still finds herself stepping towards him. He doesn't look up, but she can see the blank look in his eyes, hair more a mess than normal, mouth held tightly.

"You cancelled Quidditch?" she says nonsensically, because he isn't speaking and she can't stand the silence.

He nods, expression unchanged. "That I did."

"You never cancel practice."

At first she thinks he isn't going to answer her, she supposes it isn't a statement that necessarily requires an answer. But after a few moments he speaks again.

"To be fair, I've only been Captain for one term."

"Yeah but..." she doesn't know why she feels the need to push this, except that it feels important somehow. "You're you."

He laughs dryly. "I am me."

"Quidditch is like—like half your personality. The first time I met you it was all "Gryffindor this" and "My dad that" and "Quidditch, Quidditch, Quidditch." That was it. The whole train ride here, all you could talk about were those three things."

“I sound insufferable.”

“Well obviously.”

That manages to get a genuine laugh out of him, even if it’s only half-hearted.

“Obviously,” he repeats.

More silence. Lily should go. She knows she should. This is just...awkward...and weird. But something in her stomach, in her chest, keeps her still. Unwilling to give the moment up. The chance to talk to him. To have his attention. God, when did she become so pathetic?

“I guess the other half of me is stronger,” James says after too long. Lily tries to catch up.

“What?”

Finally, he looks at her. “You said Quidditch is half of who I am,” he shrugs. “I guess the other half is stronger.”

She struggles to hold his stare. It isn’t...right, somehow. Too...sad. She’s not sure she’s ever seen that before. Sure, James has been angry and confused and hurt, but this is something else.

“What’s the other half?” she finds herself asking, desperate to know.

He holds her stare for another few seconds before looking away. “Listen,” the tone of his voice has changed, “about New Years Eve—“

Lily raises her hand to stop him. “It’s whatever James. Stupid drama. It doesn’t matter.” Lies, all of it.

“Have you talked to Mary about it?” he asks eventually. That actually startles a laugh out of her.

“No. No I’m not really...anyway, like I said, it doesn’t matter. It’s not like I want you to... you know...anyway.” God, she can’t even finish a sentence.

He’s staring at his hands again. “I do know,” he says eventually, and Lily’s not sure why instead of relief she feels disappointed. Like she wanted him to see through her. To know that she is completely gone on him. All butterflies and weak knees and every other ridiculous cliché.

“I’m still sorry though,” he goes on, “it felt a little...harsh. Even if you don’t want me to... want you,” they both cringe, though Lily suspects for different reasons.

“Alright, well, apology accepted then,” she says, eager to move past this. Except that it becomes immediately apparent that James has nothing else to say to her.

Go.

She shouts at herself.

You're being weird. He clearly wants to be alone, just go!

"Are you alright James?" she finally asks, voice soft, feet very much not moving.

He laughs without humour, picking at his fingers. "Nah, I don't think so," he says it so casually that for a moment Lily is almost certain she's misheard.

"Do—can I help?" she asks pathetically. "Is it...did something happen over the break? Your parents—"

James shakes his head. It takes a long time for him to speak. Too long really. Despite her best efforts Lily starts to fidget. She's never been very patient.

"Sometimes I feel like we're being hung out to dry here," he says quietly, barely audible even in the empty hallway. "There's this war coming—or starting—or happening—but no one really wants to...to talk to us about it. Like they're afraid we can't handle it or that it'll scare us or some other bullshit excuse. But like...we're in it too, we're already involved. There are kids in this school choosing sides. Being forced to choose. And everyone is just...acting like they can't see it. Or like it isn't as real for us."

Lily is frankly a little blown away to hear any of this coming out of James Potter's mouth. Besides the fact that it is not at all the direction she saw this conversation going in, she has always felt that the Purebloods were kind of oblivious to the reality of the situation. That they didn't see what was going on or, if they did, they couldn't quite grasp how dangerous it was. Yet here is James Potter, king of the Purebloods, reflecting all her own outrage back at her.

"Bad things are happening," James goes on, voice rough. "I can see it and I want to help—I'm trying to help—but this is so much bigger than anything I've ever had to deal with and I feel like I keep failing. Keep letting everyone down. I just need someone to tell me what to do, you know? To stop hiding things from me in some pointless attempt to protect me and just explain the rules, show me how to fight. Because I will. I fucking will I just—right now it's like all I'm doing is punching walls. All I have are bloody hands."

She isn't sure if it's his words or his fidgeting or the way he keeps looking at them—his hands—but before she can think better of it she reaches out, wrapping her own hands gently around his, stilling his frantic fingers. She expects him to pull away but he doesn't, just keeps staring down at the place where they're touching, a faint expression of surprise on his face.

"All any of us can do is try. Honestly I'm not sure even Dumbledore is managing more than that these days."

James shakes his head, eyes glassy even though he isn't crying. "It's not enough."

She squeezes his hands. "Are you kidding me? It's everything," she wishes that her voice didn't sound quite so besotted but she presses on quickly before either of them can think about it. "You know how many people brush me off when I talk about how bad things have gotten in this school? How many teachers?"

James looks up at her affronted. “What?”

She nods. “And sometimes I don’t wanna push it, you know? I’m not as brave as Mary,” she gives him a self deprecating smile. “I’m worried that if we become too much of a nuisance we’ll lose the allies we have.”

James’s eyes widen. “That’s fucked, that so fucked Lily,” he squeezes her hands back.

She only shrugs. “It’s life. There are a lot of Wizards who have more to gain by keeping quiet than speaking out,” she looks at him. “You’re one of them, so is Sirius—we all got to watch how much it cost him, standing up.”

“He’d do it again,” James says, fiercely. “In a heartbeat.”

“Yeah,” Lily smirks a little. “Yeah I know. It—I don’t know how to explain what it meant to me. To Mary too. Watching him walk away. Watching you help him, support him. With the exception of a few, most people aren’t awful to your face, but when push comes to shove they don’t have your back. Aren’t gonna risk anything,” she swallows, throat dry, trying to get her thoughts in order so she can stop giving him a bloody sermon.

“What I’m trying to say,” she goes on eventually. “Is you seeing what’s going on, you caring, it’s important. It’s enough.”

He holds her eyes, searching her face. “I’m here for you, you know that right? If something happens...” his voice is warm, if he’s ever spoken to her like this before she can’t remember it. All artifice and performance stripped away, he speaks with heat and care and something that makes her chest ache. “I’ll always believe you. Always.”

Oh.

Oh fuck him.

Fuck him all the way into the centre of the sun.

What gives him the right to look at her like that?

To say that to her?

And not want her.

Because he doesn’t. And she has to remind herself of that, especially right now, in this moment, when he’s talking like she’s someone who matters to him, both of his hands curled around her’s.

If James notices the effect his words are having on Lily he doesn’t show it, instead he lets out a sigh, head falling back against the wall behind him as he closes his eyes. It takes Lily an embarrassingly long time to get herself together.

“Did something happen James?” she asks again, because she can’t quite imagine that this has all come out of nowhere.

She sees him swallow, sees his eyes squeeze more tightly shut. “I need to find someone. I think they’re in trouble. It might be my fault. So I have to find them but I don’t know how.”

Lily nods, taking that in. She has no idea who it could be, since all the other marauders are accounted for, but she decides not to push. If James doesn’t want to tell her he doesn’t have to.

“I’m assuming there’s no one who can...help?”

James shakes his head.

“Okay,” Lily’s mind is already humming with possibilities. Looking for something, anything that she can do. Any way she can help. “Maybe...maybe there’s a spell—”

He shakes his head again. “I’ve been looking. So has Remus. We asked Flitwick and McGonagall. The closest would be the tracking spell—Appare Vestigium—but it only shows recent magical footprints. It doesn’t reveal someone’s location.”

Lily blinks, something clinking into place. “Okay, okay but wait—that’s not a bad start.”

James opens his eyes, turning to her quizzically, eyebrow raised. “Not a bad start?”

She nods, a dozen different possibilities whipping through her head. “What if we altered the spell—found a way to locate a specific magical footprint or signature,” she focuses on him again. “Do you have something that would have their magical footprint on it? Something they cast a spell on? The more involved the magic was the better.”

“I—er—yeah. Yeah, actually, I do.”

Lily nods. “Okay, good. That’s good. If we have that than maybe...” she trails off. “I have to go to the library, there are about a dozen books I need to take out.” Without even thinking she starts walking in that direction.

“Wait,” James sits up properly, hand reaching out to her even though she’s too far to touch. “Do you really think, I mean, you really think we can do this? Alter the spell?”

She meets his hopeful eyes, holding them for long enough that nothing she says can be misinterpreted as flippant, “It’s like I said before,” she shrugs, aiming for a casual confidence she doesn’t feel, “we can try.”

PART II JAMES

His feet have barely hit the ground before he’s walking.

“Potter? Oi, Potter!?”

The sky above them is only just turning blue, the sunrise always weaker in the winter months. He doesn't slow down, doesn't turn as he hears the noise of another dozen brooms landing on the field behind him.

"James!"

"Practice is over!" he shouts over his shoulder. "Back here tomorrow, same time."

"Over?" Mary demands, other people are talking too but they have the curtesy to do it at a level that James can't hear. "How can it be over, it just bloody started!"

"I'm cutting it short. You wanna keep going, by all means, we have the pitch until eight-thirty."

"If I wanna keep going? You're the bloody captain!" she yells angrily. If he thought she was going to be nicer to him after their fight on New Years Eve he was mistaken. Not that she's wrong, mind you. A few weeks ago the idea of ending practice early would have made him choke. But things change. Priorities change. For the first time he thinks he understands Frank's choice to give up the pros for the Aurors.

"Yeah I am," he shouts back, nearly at the locker room now. "And I say practice is over!"

He ducks inside. No one else tries to stop him.

No more than fifteen minutes later he's showered and dressed and practically jogging through the school towards the library. It's early enough that the corridors are still pretty deserted—at least the ones that don't lead to the Great Hall where the smell of bacon and syrup call out to his already grumbling stomach. But food will have to wait.

There are one or two other students in the library but few enough that he spots Lily and Remus instantly, heads bowed together, books spread out in front of them.

"Hey," he says, dropping down into the free seat next to Lily.

Both Remus and Lily jump, nearly colliding heads.

"Jesus James," Remus says, clutching his heart, "a little warning next time."

James arches his brow. "More warning than 'hey'?"

"I thought you had Quidditch?" Lily asks.

He nods. "I did. Ended it early. So," he nods at the book currently open between them, "find anything?"

When his gaze meets Lily's he realizes how close he's sitting to her. He's never noticed before—the flecks of gold in her eyes.

“Er—“ Lily shakes herself, similarly distracted it would seem, though James doesn’t know by what.

“We’ve found the right conjugation we’re pretty sure, but something is missing from the end of the spell, something to give it strength, a far reach—geographically speaking,” Remus gestures to the open book and James can see lists of different letter combinations and their magical properties, along with a small descriptions on the power of certain syllables.

“Couldn’t it be a wand movement?” he asks after a minute.

Lily nods, reaching over him to tap on the large stack of books in the centre of the table. “Those are next,” she says with a small smile. James stares at all the work they still have to do, his foot starting to bounce anxiously under the table. He keeps waiting for Regulus to just show up at breakfast one day—healthy and safe. It’s an unlikely scenario but it’s the only thing keeping him from losing his mind. The spell is taking too long, the three of them are doing everything they can but it’s still not enough.

Lily places a warm hand on his forearm, stilling him. “It’ll be okay. We’ll find them. I promise.”

He gives her a tight smile. He knows she has no real choice but to say that. He also knows it’s not something she can actually promise.

“Lets show him the map,” Lily says finally, tearing her eyes away from James to look at Remus who is giving them a questioning stare that James can’t understand.

“Yeah, okay,” he nods after a second, pulling out his wand and spelling the books off the table and into neat little stacks on the floor. Both Remus and Lily stand so James follows suit, watching as Lily pulls out a large rolled map and begins unfurling it on the tabletop with Remus’s help. Black ink and beige canvas stares up at James, and it only takes him a minute to realize what he’s looking at.

“Britain?” he asks, looking at his two friends for confirmation.

“We should be able to get the spell to stretch far enough to cover approximately this much land.”

“But no more?” James asks.

Remus’s grimaces. “Magic across borders gets tricky for a lot of reasons, not just distance. Trying to stretch the spell further would weaken it and potentially—er—alert the authorities to what we’re doing.”

James nods, feeling something like fear gnaw at his stomach. “Makes sense,” he says, staring back down at the map.

“You think they might be on the continent?” Lily asks curiously.

James just shrugs. “No idea,” though he hasn’t been able to shake the feeling that Regulus might be in France. He’s never mentioned it before but Sirius has, and James knows the

Black's have connections there.

"So," James says finally, trying to stay calm. "What's the plan? How will it work?"

"Well," Lily goes on. "I mean, it's fairly simple really. We'll cast the spell on the object with their magical footprint and then as soon as they use magic it'll be able to show us where they are on the map."

James's eyes trace the lines in front of him—roads and rivers and town borders. It's possible, of course, that the spell will tell him that Regulus is at Grimmauld Place. But if James is going to storm the place he wants to make sure.

And,

says the voice at the back of his mind.

If he's casting spells that means he isn't dead.

James shakes his head, instantly trying to get that thought out. Regulus isn't dead. There's no way, Walburga would never let anything happen to her only remaining heir.

Unless she found out that he's queer,

the voice goes on.

Unless she found out that she's been betrayed again.

He takes in a shaky breath, hand reaching out to grab hold of the table.

No.

He thinks. Has to think.

That isn't what happened. Can't be what happened.

"James?" Lily asks tentatively, causing him to look up and find both of his friends eyeing him with concern.

"I'm fi—"

"What the hell!?"

All three of them whip around to find a pissed off Sirius marching towards them, Peter in tow.

"Mr. Black!" Madam Pince, the sharp faced librarian, stands up behind her desk by the front doors, black hair pulled into a tight bun as she glares daggers at Sirius. "You will keep your voice down in my library."

It's very clear to James that Sirius is struggling not to roll his eyes. "Yes Madam Pince."

“Quieter, please,” she pushes, and while normally James would thoroughly enjoy watching Sirius get taken down by the school librarian, he really doesn’t need his best mate to be in a worse mood than he already is.

“Sorry Madam Pince,” Sirius repeats through clenched teeth, voice a near whisper.

Pince nods her head sharply. “If I have to tell you again you’ll be kicked out, understood?”

“Yes.”

“Very well, continue on,” she waves a bony hand in the air as she turns back to the parchments in front of her.

Fists at his sides and fire burning in his eyes Sirius stalks towards them.

“Fuck,” James hears Remus hiss under his breath and, quite frankly, James has to agree.

“What the hell?” Sirius whisper-shouts when he gets to their table, eyes quickly dropping down to the map spread between them which basically makes them double fucked because they can’t even pass this off as homework.

“You fucking ditched me!”

“Us!” Peter corrects from his side.

Sirius waves his hand in a ‘yeah, yeah’ gesture.

“I had Quidditch practice,” James says, feeling like that’s a pretty solid excuse until Sirius turns to him with narrowed eyes.

“Library’s a weird fucking place for Quidditch practice Prongs.”

Which is, admittedly, a good point.

“It—er—ended early?” he says, rubbing the back of his neck.

“Ended early?” Sirius demands. “First you’re cancelling practices and now you’re ending them early?”

“That is a little suspicious James,” Peter adds unhelpfully.

“Yes, thank you Wormtail,” he says flatly.

“Are you dying or something? Because the way you’ve been acting I would fucking believe it,” Sirius snarls, not sounding nearly as upset as James thinks he should about the idea of his best mates untimely demise.

“Sirius, your voice,” Remus warns, eyes flicking to Madam Pince who is now eyeing them threateningly.

“And you,” Sirius turns on him. “Don’t even get me started on you, sneaking out of bed in the middle of the goddamn night.”

Remus looks affronted. “I did not sneak.”

“Really? I don’t remember hearing anything. Do you Pete?”

Peter shakes his head. “Nah-uh.”

Remus rolls his eyes. “You two sleep like boulders. I don’t need to ‘sneak out’ not to wake you.”

“The question is why are you two scurrying off while we’re asleep in the first place,” Sirius waves an angry finger between Remus and James. “This is like the third time this week. And what the hell is Evans doing here!”

The three of them stare back at him, and then at one another. Unsure what to say at this point.

“Er—studying?” James offers up weakly, which is, of course, the wrong thing to say.

“You have got to be kidding me,” Sirius laughs humourlessly. “Why don’t you just tell me you’re going for a walk—“ James sees it then, sees something click in Sirius’s brain. “This is about him isn’t it?”

“Him?” Lily asks.

“Sirius—“

“Does she know?” he jabs an accusatory finger at Lily. “Did you tell her? Does she know who he is?”

“Who who is?” Lily demands, which, if Sirius had been paying attention, he would have seen as a clear sign that James has told Lily almost nothing. But, of course, he wasn’t.

“First Remus and now Evans? Do you trust everyone more than you trust me?”

James flinches. “No,” he says weakly. “Padfoot, listen—“

“Mr. Black,” Madam Pince’s voice cuts across the library. She’s standing again, arms folded across her chest. “I told you not to make me ask you twice.”

James watches Sirius struggle to get himself under control enough not to snap at her.

“It’s my fault Madam Pince, sorry,” James tries to jump in, but the librarian only holds up her hand.

“I know whose voice I heard Mr. Potter and it wasn’t yours,” she glares very pointedly at Sirius. “Get out Mr. Black.”

For a second James thinks he's going to argue with her, but then he sees the fight drain out of him. "Whatever," Sirius mutters, walking out of the library without even looking at the rest of them. James is about to go after him when Remus beats him to it, already spelling his things into his bag.

"I'll go get him," he says, halfway to the door. "You two okay to finish here?"

"Yeah," Lily says quickly. "Yeah we'll be fine."

Remus nods, jogging after his...after his Sirius. Making something itch in James's chest.

Peter lets out a big exhale, "Not going to lie," he says, running a hand through his dirty blond hair. "I have never been more confused in my life."

James snorts. "That says a lot coming from you."

Peter glares. "Oh fuck off," but there's no heat in it, and James gives him a half hearted smile before Lily clears her throat.

"Should we—uh—" she nods towards the map before looking at Peter and then James. "Or do you want to do this later?"

James shakes his head. They're already taking too long. He doesn't want to waste anymore time.

"Pete, mind giving us a minute? I'll meet you in the Great Hall yeah?"

Peter looks between James and Lily a few times before nodding. "Sure, yeah, okay," he looks like he's going to walk away but then pauses: "I'm glad you two have worked things out. It's always better when you're getting along."

James finds himself taken off guard but before he can think of a response Peter is already halfway out the door.

"Well," Lily sighs beside him, collapsing down into her chair. "That was...a lot."

"Yeah," James says, copying her. "Sorry."

She waves her hand, knocking his fears away. "So," she says eventually, "do you have the item for me? The one with the magical footprint?"

"Oh," James had almost forgotten. "Yeah I—yeah," as he reaches into his bag and feels his fingers brush the small wooden box at the bottom he finds himself infinitely grateful that Remus isn't there.

He brings it out carefully, reluctant to give it up when Lily reaches for it. He has the absurd desire to pull away, to tell her not to touch it. He does neither of those things, of course.

"This is beautiful," she says, before her eyes flick up to him. "Can I open it?"

He clears his throat. “Yeah,” voice still rough. “Yeah, you can open it.”

He sees confusion on her face as her eyes find the red ball inside, resting on its satin cushion. She stares at it for a few seconds before looking back at him. “I don’t—“

“It’s a Quaffle,” he explains softly, ignoring the ache in his chest. Ignoring the memory of Regulus’s face when he’d given it to him—how nervous he’d been, unsure, like James was ever going to do anything but love it.

“A Quaffle?” she repeats.

He nods. “Take it out.”

She only hesitates for a minute before doing as he asked. As soon as she frees it it starts buzzing around her, causing a laugh to tumble from her lips. “Oh my God, it really is a tiny Quaffle.”

James smiles back a little tightly “Yeah.”

“I’ve never seen one of these before.”

“You wouldn’t have, he—er—he made it,” James’s nails have started to dig into his palms. He’d taken the Quaffle out every day over the break. Held it in his hand, watched it flutter around his room during the few moments he found himself alone. Everything about it reminds him of Regulus.

“Is this the—uh—the ‘he’ Sirius was talking about?” Lily asks tentatively.

James suddenly feels very vulnerable. Like he’s had something pulled back and stripped away. He swallows with difficulty, trying to keep his voice casual. “Yeah,” he meets her stare and doesn’t know what she sees. Or what she thinks. Or if it’s all written across his face.

You need to learn to hide yourself better,

Regulus said to him once.

Put on some armour every once and a while. You know, even brave men carry shields.

“Okay,” Lily says eventually, carefully picking the ball out of the air and placing it back in its box. There’s silence for a few seconds before she goes on. “If he did all the spell work on this than it should work really well. It’ll help if I can get a feel for the signature do—I mean, would you mind if I kept this for a little while?”

Yes.

I mind.

It’s him.

It’s mine.

“No, that’s fine. I figured you would need to,” he shrugs, like those words don’t choke him.

Lily nods. “Okay, thank you,” there’s another pause, she’s biting her lower lip as James fights every urge he has to snatch the wooden box back out of her hands. Eventually she reaches forward, squeezing his arm. “I’m gonna take good care of it.”

He nods jerkily. “Thanks,” in a voice so quiet Madam Pince would be proud.

“Of course,” Lily ducks her head to meet his eyes. “We’re going to find him okay?”

James laughs dryly. “You don’t even know who he is.”

Lily shrugs. “I know you care about him,” she says simply. “I know he clearly cares about you,” she nods towards the box.

Those words feel like pressing on a bruise.

“I didn’t get him a Christmas gift,” he says for some reason, voice too thick. He coughs, trying to clear his throat. “It slipped my mind, or it never occurred to me, I don’t know. He went and made me that,” he gestures at the Quaffle. “And I didn’t even bother to—“ his voice drops and after a few seconds finds itself again. “I got him something over the break, to make up for it, I was going to give it to him when we got back.” He looks helplessly at Lily.

“You’re still going to give it to him,” she says, squeezing his arm. “Okay?”

He wants to believe her. Really he does.

“Yeah, okay. Thanks.”

“Of course.”

“No, I mean it. Thank you for...” he gestures at the books and parchment. “You didn’t have to. Especially not after New Years.”

She looks at him for a moment, something thoughtful in her eyes, maybe also a little sad. James doesn’t want to think too much about that last thing. About whether or not he’s the cause of it. He doesn’t want Lily to be sad. Not ever.

“You remember what you said the other day, about being there for me? About believing me?”

James nods slowly. “Yeah, of course.”

She gives him a small smile. “That goes both ways. I’m here for you. Always. I realize I’m not exactly a Marauder but, we can still have each others backs right?”

James feels something leap in his chest. “Yes, totally,” and then, at a loss for anything else to say: “You’re basically an honorary Marauder anyway.”

That makes Lily laugh, loosening some of the tension in James’s chest. “Does that mean I get a dumb nickname?” she asks.

James frowns. “Hey! We have very cool nicknames I’ll have you know.”

“Uh-huh. So what’s mine then?”

His eyes run her over before the ghost of a grin starts pulling at his mouth. “Fox.”

She arches her brow. “Fox? Is it because of my hair or because I’m exceedingly clever?”

He smirks, leaning forward. “It’s because you, Lily Evans, are a stone cold fox.”

The pair of them are able to hold a straight face for exactly five seconds before they both burst out laughing.

“I see your lines haven’t improved,” she says, choking back a giggle.

“Oi! I thought that one was pretty good!”

She snorts. “You’re so corny Potter.”

“Yeah, whatever, you were totally charmed. I could see it in your eyes.”

“Keep dreaming.”

“Miss Evans and Mr. Potter,” Madam Pince’s sharp voice slices through their giggling. “Am I going to have to kick you both out as well?” She tilts her head down, glasses sliding to the end of her pointed nose. She’s always reminded James of a very grumpy bird.

“No ma’am,” James calls back.

“We’re just leaving Madam Pince.” Lily says, already starting to pack her things away.

James feels his momentarily uplifted mood sink again as his eyes fall on the wooden box, as he watches her put it in her bag. Something must show on his face because Lily pauses.

“I promise I’ll keep it safe,” she reassures him again.

James looks at her quickly and then away. “I believe you,” he gets to his feet, slinging his bag over his shoulder. “Well, see you around I guess?”

She nods, sliding the last of her books into her own bag. “Yeah—tomorrow morning?”

“Tomorrow morning,” James confirms.

They stand awkwardly for a moment, neither of them knowing what to do.

“Well…” James says eventually, giving her a half-wave before walking out of the library with his head down, feeling like he’s just left part of himself behind in Lily Evan’s book bag.

“What the hell is going on out there?”

James is breathing heavy, covered in sweat and looking out at a very defeated Gryffindor Quidditch team. They’re halfway through their game against Ravenclaw and they’re getting absolutely destroyed.

“This should be an easy win for us!” no one is making eye contact with him—well, except for Mary. “Start bloody communicating and open your fucking eyes. Watch what’s going on around you, keep track of the other team. We’re making sloppy mistakes out there people, come on!”

Silence greets these words and James sighs, running a hand through his sweaty hair.

“We can still win this,” he says finally, earning him a snort from Mary that he decides to ignore. “But we need to wake the fuck up, alright?” more silence, James does his best not to scream. “I said: alright?”

“Yes captain,” comes the less than enthusiastic response, but James is pretty sure that’s the best he’s going to get so he doesn’t push the matter.

It’s only a few moments later that Madam Hooch’s disembodied voice calls them back out to the pitch. James waits by the door, trying to rally himself as much as his team, giving each of them a pat on the back or high-five as they pass.

“Sorry James,” Marlene says when she gets to him.

“Nah don’t be,” he squeezes her shoulder. “Bad games happen right? We can still make finals even if we lose this one.” As long as they win every other game by a substantial margin, but James doesn’t say that bit. Marlene knows it anyway.

Mary is the last one in line.

“Save it,” James says wearily.

But she, of course, does not.

“Half the players on this team are new,” she starts, causing James to roll his eyes as he walks down the tunnel towards the Pitch. “We’ve barely played together, I was out most of first term, we need all the air time we can get.”

“Yes, I’m aware of that, thank you.”

“You royally screwed us here James—we can’t communicate out there because we don’t know how because you’ve been skiving off practices.”

They walk out onto the sunny field, half the team already back in the sky, the stands cheering.

“Just play the fucking game Mary,” he says, hands gripping his broom so tightly his knuckles are threatening to tear through his skin.

“You’re personal life can’t effect your game.”

His head whips around so fast he’s surprised his neck doesn’t crack. “Leave my fucking personal life out of this.”

She holds his stare for one challenging moment before shaking her head. “You know, the pros may be a guarantee for James Fleamont fucking Potter, but for the rest of us playing well here actually matters. So get your goddamn head out of your ass and pull it together.”

With that she kicks off, speeding into the blue sky, a cursing James following behind. The problem is, as big of a pain in the ass as Mary is, he knows she’s right. He’s fucking this up. Seems to be a common theme with him lately.

They lose.

It’s not a surprise. But it still stings.

James takes his time undressing. Takes even more time in the showers. He turns the heat up too high and rests his forehead against the tile and just...breathes. And waits. He’s the captain, he shouldn’t be in here hiding, he should be out there making sure his team is okay. Especially the younger players. Frank was always so good at that—at reassuring them all, making sure no one ate themselves alive with guilt. Quidditch is a team sport. They win together and they lose together. It never lands on just one person. That’s what he should be out there saying, he just...he can’t. Because this time the blame does fall on one person.

Him.

His skin is flushed and raw by the time he finally turns the shower off, wrapping a towel round his waist as he walks back into the changing room. His steps only stutter for a second when he finds someone in there waiting for him.

He sighs, walking over to his locker and pulling out his clothes. “Here to gloat?”

Mary snorts. “We’re on the same fucking team, what the hell would I be gloating about?”

James shrugs, pulling his boxers on under his towel before throwing it off. He should maybe feel more self-conscious about being practically naked in front of Mary but he isn’t. He’s known her since they were eleven. The novelty has worn off. Besides, they’ve always been more family than anything else.

“About being right,” he says finally, he has his back to her, yanking his shirt over his head.

“Right about what?” Mary asks.

James sighs, leaning against his locker for a moment, feeling so utterly exhausted he can barely get his thoughts in order.

“About me being crap.”

There's a beat of silence.

"You're not crap James."

He laughs without humour, pulling himself off the wall and turning to look at her. She's wearing sweatpants and an oversized jumper James is almost certain used to belong to Sirius.

"You having me on?"

She rolls her eyes. "God, you're so melodramatic. You're not crap. You know you're not. But you've dropped the ball the last two weeks, and I know you know that too."

He wants to fight back. Wants to argue. Wants her to be wrong.

"Yeah," he says resigned. "Yeah, I know."

He turns back to his locker and grabs a hold of his jeans, shoving his legs inelegantly inside.

"He didn't come back then?"

James instantly tenses. "Mary, I really don't have the energy to fight with you right now."

"I'm not trying to fight, I'm just trying to understand."

James sighs, only half believing her as he turns around and drops onto the bench. "No," he says slowly, resting his elbows on his thighs and clasping his hands together between his knees. "He didn't come back."

Mary nods slowly, her eyes raking over him in a way that only she can. Like she sees every dirty, broken inch of you. James has always thought she'd make a good Auror. Give a suspect a few minutes locked in a room with her and they'd start spilling their guts in no time.

"And you don't think that was his choice?" she asks eventually.

He grits his teeth, trying not to get short with her. "No. I don't think so."

Mary nods again, like she's had something confirmed. "Listen, if you need...I don't know, a break? A time-out? Whatever. That's fine," she leans forward even though they're a room apart. "Let me run some practices then, let me fucking help you. I'm a good player—"

"I know that," James says, entirely taken off guard by this turn in the conversation.

"Good," she holds his stare. "This matters to me James," she says with a level of sincerity that is uncommon for Mary. "It's my dream too. I want to win this year. Hell, I want to win next year. I want scouts to come here and watch us dominate."

James runs a hand over his face, "Yeah," he says finally. "Yeah me too." He shakes his head, laughing a little bit. "Okay, if I need to...if I can't be here I'll let you take over. I'm sorry that I—" he doesn't know how to finish that sentence, how to explain what a mess he's been since coming back to school and finding Regulus gone. "This matters to me too," he settles on.

Mary nods, getting to her feet. “I know, if I didn’t think you cared I would have already overthrown you.”

“Fuck, alright,” James snorts. “Well, thanks for showing some restraint I guess.”

“You’re welcome.”

He waits for her to head out, she looks like she’s going to, but instead she just keeps standing there. Like she’s trying to decide whether or not to say what she’s thinking—which is odd for Mary, who always seems to say anything regardless of how rude or callous it might sound.

“Whatever it is, would you just ask it?” James says eventually. “Having you looming there is making me nervous.”

Mary rolls her eyes but her expression is suddenly determined. “I’m only going to say this once so listen alright?”

“Er—alright?”

She pinches the bridge of her nose. “I’m—sorry.”

James blinks, almost positive that he’s misheard. “Did you just—“

“I told you I was only gonna say it once,” she snaps, and James finds himself biting the inside of his cheek to keep from smiling.

“I don’t take back what I said—well, except maybe the stuff about Lily—but I do take back the way that I said it. It wasn’t—anyway,” she shakes her head. “I’m a bitch but I’m not normally that much of a bitch.”

James isn’t entirely sure how to respond to that so eventually he just nods. “Yeah,” he says, “I know.”

Mary shoots him a dry smile. “Well look at us, working through our problems like adults. Go team.”

James laughs. “Yeah, go team.”

He’s still smiling a little as he makes his way back up to the castle twenty minutes later, Mary having ditched him to go find Marlene. It’ll be good honestly, having a little help with the team. He should have considered it earlier, Mary has always been one of the strongest players they have, and while he doesn’t intend to make a habit of skipping out on practices, having a second opinion on what the team needs might be good. It’s been a lot, doing it on his own. He’s not sure how Frank managed it, but then, Frank had Alice.

“James! James!”

He looks up and finds Lily running towards him across the foyer, a couple other people turning to look too.

“Lily? What’s—” he doesn’t finish as she practically barrels into him, knocking the words out of his mouth as she skids to a stop, grabbing hold of his arms.

“It’s working.”

He blinks. “What?”

“The spell—the spell—it’s working. Me and Remus were playing around with it earlier and we figured it out—“

“You figured it out and you didn’t tell me?”

Lily makes an impatient noise. “You were already down at the Quidditch Pitch getting ready for the game and anyway, we were pretty sure it worked but we couldn’t be certain because it only does something if the person you’re trying to find is using magic. So Remus went to the game but I decided to stay behind and watch it and it just—it moved. It started moving.”

It moved.

Those words find their way deep inside his chest.

Regulus is using magic.

He’s okay.

He’s okay.

“Where—show me,” James starts walking even though he has no idea where he’s going.

Lily grabs hold of his wrist and drags him down the corridor. It takes him a while before he realizes that she’s taking him to the Prefects’ office. To be fair, it’s not a place he spends much time in.

With the wave of her wand she opens the door to the empty room, a few candles are lit here and there, two desks set up at the front for the Head Boy and Girl. There’s also a sofa and some chairs, a half empty bookshelf, a coffee table covered in Honeydukes wrappers and old Witch Weekly magazines.

Lily drags him all the way across the room to a small table that’s been pushed up against the window. He sees the familiar map and the small floating Quaffle except, unlike usual, it isn’t flitting around, but instead hovering in one fixed spot over the map.

Lily stops dead in her tracks, eyes going wide. James pulls out of her grasp moving closer.

“He’s here then, it’s found him, he’s...” he squints down at the map trying to identify the place the ball is currently marking. “He’s...in the middle of the water?” James blinks, panic rising up inside him. His imagination assaults him with visions of Regulus just being dumped

somewhere or left to drown, his family is psychotic so even though that sounds crazy they really might have done it. He tries to remind himself that they wouldn't have been able to find Regulus at all if he hadn't used magic and if he's using magic then he can't be lying at the bottom of the ocean dead, right? RIGHT.

"I don't understand," he can hear the tremor of fear in his voice as he turns to Lily for reassurance but doesn't find any. Her green eyes are wide as she stares at the map. "Maybe it's wrong, maybe the spell didn't work, huh? Maybe we need to try again?"

Eventually Lily swallows, looking up at him. Is that pity he sees in her gaze? Oh he doesn't like that, and neither does the fear currently writhing around in his chest.

"James," she says slowly, "that's the North Sea."

Right now James's brain isn't really working very well, too crowded with white noise and nightmare scenarios so he just nods, hoping she'll explain what that means. Why it has her looking at him like that.

"It's—James, fuck, I'm so sorry."

"No, please. Why? Don't be. What're you—"

She steps forward, hand circling his wrist, grounding him. "James," she says his name softly. He hates it. Sounds like the way you say someone's name before you tear their world apart.

"He's in Azkaban"

Chapter End Notes

I'M SORRY THIS IS SO LATE

Really, I am.

I had a bunch of school / work stuff and it just took me way too long.

This is one of those chapters where I hope that the stuff I'm doing works even though maybe it's like a little more of an interpretation of HP than hardcore canon? IDK, IDK what the rules are.

ANYWAY, thank you, love you, y'all are so kind which is truly a gift on the internet. I will try to get the next chapter out faster!

Chapter 34

Chapter Summary

I feel personally victimized by this chapter (I KNOW I WROTE IT OKAY)

Chapter Notes

IMPORTANT: This chapter takes place at the same time as the last chapter (basically it's the last chapter from Sirius and Regulus's perspectives), if I was a better writer I wouldn't have to tell you that but unfortunately for all of us I am not

TW: Child abuse (thank you Walburga)

TW: Eating stuff (not related to body image more like stress management or even self harm I guess)

TW: Death / killing (no major characters were harmed in the making of this chapter)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

PART I: REGULUS

AUGUST 1971

Sirius and Regulus sit crossed-legged on Sirius's bed, the duvet hovering above them like a makeshift tent. Their father's doing.

"Again," Regulus whispers, eyes wide as he stares at the new wand clutched in his older brother's hand. He can see Sirius's grin even in the dark.

"Lumos." The tip begins to glow, lightening up the fort and causing Regulus to gasp just like he did the last four times.

"It's so beautiful," Regulus says, before blushing. His mother doesn't like when he talks like that—beautiful, pretty—she says it makes him sound soft.

But Sirius only smiles wider. "Neat huh?" he says, waving his wand around a little. "All I had to do was read it in my textbook and I figured it out right away. This school thing is gonna be so freaking easy."

Regulus nods enthusiastically, certain he's right, Sirius is the smartest person he knows. "Why do you even need to go at all? Couldn't you just learn all your magic from books?" he hopes his voice doesn't sound as desperate as he feels.

Tomorrow Sirius is going to the train station, going to Hogwarts, going away from Regulus. Until Christmas. He feels his lower lip start to tremble and instantly stops thinking about it. Sirius doesn't mind when he calls things pretty, but he hates it when Regulus cries.

"I could probably teach myself yeah," Sirius shrugs, with all the cocky assurance of an eleven year old. "But then I'd have to stay here." He wrinkles his nose, like the very thought leaves a bad taste in his mouth.

"But you'd be with me," Regulus says meekly, causing his brother's face to soften.

"Aw Reg, you know I love you right?" he claps Regulus on the shoulder. "You're my best friend. But I can't stand this house. It's too stuffy. It's too small."

Regulus doesn't really know what he's talking about, the house feels plenty big to him. Too big even. He hates being alone on the top floor—hearing the floorboards creak or windows rattle and knowing that he has to run down at least three flights of stairs before he'll find another person.

"Besides, you'll be joining me next year, so it's not even that long."

A year feels like an eternity to Regulus.

"You'll write?" he asks nervously.

"Of course I'll write!" Sirius says, like it's the most obvious thing in the world. "I'll write everyday."

Regulus feels his heart leap. "Everyday?"

Sirius smiles again. "Everyday," he knocks their foreheads together and Regulus laughs. A moment later Sirius's wand flickers and goes out.

JANUARY 1977

Sirius never did, of course.

Write everyday.

Or any day.

Regulus forgave him. He forgave him at the time and he forgives him now. It's an awful lot to expect of an eleven year old, to keep his promises.

Regulus can't figure out if it's irony or some other form of poetic justice that years later James Potter would manage what Sirius hadn't. Writing him a letter for every week they were apart. Regulus thinks about it as he lies on his back in a cot in Azkaban, arm thrown behind his head as a makeshift pillow.

His feet hang off the end which is unfortunate because of the rats. They like to...snack. He tries to pull his legs in but his muscles cramp and his back hurts. He isn't used to being this tall. Or strong. He's clunky and awkward when he moves, unable to accurately judge his size in relation to the things and spaces around him. He ran into a few low hanging doors when they were smuggling him in.

Despite the fact that they're technically family, Regulus doesn't know the man whose identity he is currently impersonating. Rabastan Lestrangle is Rodolphus's younger brother, though only by a year and a few months. He's muscular, with dark hair and thick dark eyebrows that hang over the rest of his face. He also, apparently, has skills currently required by Lord Voldemort. And while the Dark Lord does control the guards of Azkaban—as Evan is always so fond of reminding Regulus—he does not control Minister Minchum, or Head Judge Crouch, who also happens to be Barty's bloody dad. Both of them have taken to visiting the prison sporadically. So the Dark Lord needed a decoy.

Enter Regulus.

He had, of course, not been overly keen on the whole thing, especially when they informed him that he would not be able to keep his wand on him, on the off chance that Minchum or Crouch came into his cell to interrogate him and saw it. He had been reassured, however, that the Dementors would leave him alone. Which they have.

Mostly.

Every once and a while they linger at his door, eyeing him like a freshly cooked steak. It's unsettling as all hell, but they never get any closer. You don't need to be touching them to feel them of course. The cold sadness that bleeds out of them creeps along the floor and sneaks inside your skin. Sometimes the feeling lingers for hours after they've left.

The cell itself isn't as scary as it is dull. There are no windows, or even really any furniture to speak of. So Regulus passes the time day dreaming. He tries to remember bits of James's letters from memory, he's reread them enough after all. He closes his eyes and imagines James sitting beside his bed reciting them.

My mum makes these like crazy good burgers, James says today. It's about the only thing she can actually make and doesn't need Mimi's help with. She does it without magic too. We have this weird Muggle thing—you keep it outside and it has a grill and it cooks things? I don't know if that makes any sense to you but, anyway, mum says they don't taste right if you just magic them. I always help her make the patties. You take ground beef and spices and egg and roll them together into balls and then squish them. I'll show you one day. I'll cook you dinner. It'll be all romantic and shit. I know you're rolling your eyes but you'll love it, I swear.

Regulus tries to imagine what James Potter's kitchen looks like. Tries to picture him and his mum standing side by side. Tries to imagine James Potter cooking him dinner. Like they're a real couple. They aren't of course, but it's a nice fantasy.

Sometimes he imagines the two of them in their own kitchen. In their own house—no, flat, a flat somewhere in London. Somewhere close to the Quidditch stadium. Or at least the Apparition point to the stadium. There's one bedroom, it has big windows and a big bed with mountains of pillows. There are posters on the walls of their favourite Quidditch players. Of them. Because of course, they're both playing on professional teams. Their brooms are hung up in the front hall. James always leaves his shoes in front of the door but Regulus doesn't complain, just rolls his eyes and kicks them out of the way. Regulus always plays his music too loud but James doesn't tell him to turn it down, just wanders around the flat afterwards pretending to be deaf and ignoring everything Regulus says until eventually he cracks and starts laughing.

Regulus has too much time here.

In Azkaban.

It's dangerous.

Every day he builds more and more of this life he knows he can't have.

Everyday he lets the one he does slip a little further away.

PART II: SIRIUS

JUNE 1972

Kreacher is the one to pick him up from the station. Sirius should have seen that coming since he was also the one who picked him up at Christmas but some part of him still feels... embarrassed. All the other kids have parents waiting for them—parents who are desperate to see them. James's mum practically crushes him she hugs him so hard, covering his face in about a dozen kisses. James thinks that's embarrassing but it isn't. Not really. Mostly it just makes Sirius's chest itch.

"Madam is wanting Master Sirius in the dining room please," Kreacher says as Sirius starts up the stairs towards his room, mouth already half open, ready to call out Reg's name. His brother is the only reason Sirius is excited to be home. He has so much to tell him. Plus, he managed to get some of the older kids to bring him back stuff from Honeydukes and Zonkos that he knows Reg is gonna go absolutely mental for.

"Can't I just drop my bag off first?" Sirius whines.

In a crack Kreacher appears on the step above him, sliding the bag off his shoulder without even asking. "Madam said immediately after home getting, now go, go, go."

Sirius scowls, huffing dramatically as he walks back down the stairs. Sometimes he really hates that elf.

It's been months since he's seen his mother. Oddly he wonders if he should thank her. The kids at Hogwarts all think Sirius is fearless—the way he talks back to teachers and breaks rules. But the truth is, after Grimmauld Place, it's hard to find the teachers at Hogwarts intimidating. What're they gonna do? Make him scrub the floors? Write lines? Do homework? None of that seems like punishment compared to what happens to him when he misbehaves at home. So in a way, his mother terrorizing him all of his life has managed to turn him into a bit of a legend. And Sirius likes being a legend. Likes being talked about and gasped at. Notoriety suits him.

He pauses at the doors to the dining room, taking a deep breath before knocking lightly on the glass. You always have to knock in this house, it doesn't matter what room it is. If the doors are closed you have to announce your presence.

“Come in.”

Slowly Sirius opens the door. His mother is sitting at the head of the table, glasses on, several pieces of parchment spread out around her. His father isn't there which is never a good thing. He, at least, keeps her civil. Most of the time.

“Mum,” Sirius says as he approaches her cautiously.

She looks up at him and then back down at her papers. So he waits. Back straight, hands clasped behind him. He doesn't even have to think about it, it's been beaten into him so many times—how to stand and sit and eat. James mocked him endlessly for his table manners for the first few weeks of school. It'd taken Sirius a while to unlearn what his mother had drilled into him. But back in this familiar space it's like his body can't help it.

She leaves him waiting for a long time—not speaking to him or acknowledging his presence. It isn't unusual. She does this a lot. Like everything else, it's a test. To see if he can stand still and wait. If he can behave.

Eventually she puts down her quill and sits back, eyeing him for a moment, sharp eyes burning holes in his skin. He does his best not to fidget. It will only make whatever is coming worse.

“You've disappointed me and your father greatly.”

Of course I have, he doesn't say. There was a time when those words would have hurt, but he's heard them too often at this point. He's numb to it.

“I'm sorry,” he says, what else is there?

“Not only were you placed in Gryffindor,” that had been the topic of most of his Christmas holidays. He had received a howler at school as well. Another embarrassment, though not nearly as bad as when Albus freaking Dumbledore pulled him into his office to tell him that his mother had been writing, demanding her son be placed in Slytherin where he belonged.

So Dumbledore had asked him; what do you want?

And, well.

He was still in Gryffindor wasn't he?

"But you have continued to disobey our explicit instructions to avoid unseemly associations."

"I haven't—"

"Don't lie to me," she doesn't yell, but her words are sharp and cold. She holds her threats behind her teeth.

Sirius swallows. "James Potter and Peter Pettigrew are both Purebloods," he forces himself to say even though it makes him feel vaguely nauseous to talk about his friends this way.

"The Pettigrews are a family of questionable lineage and the Potters are Blood traitors, neither worthy of the heir of the House of Black. But they are not who I was referring to."

Sirius stands still, staring off her right shoulder because looking her straight in the eye is the easiest way to get your mind cracked open and read like a storybook.

"Remus Lupin."

Sirius isn't able to stop his breath from catching, a reaction his mother will no doubt have noticed. He'd been so careful to keep Remus out of his mouth and out of his head when he'd been home for Christmas. Keeping him safely locked away inside himself where no one in this house could touch him.

"Who?" he finally asks.

That was stupid.

She hits him across the face. Open palmed. A warning shot.

"I'm not interested in playing games," her voice is steady, like nothing happened. Sirius still has his hands clasped behind his back. He knows better than to bring them up, then to touch his face.

"Who told you about Remus?" he asks finally. It's not the answer she wants. Too much defiance. But he won't apologize for Remus. Not even to save himself.

There's a momentary pause before she pulls out her wand and Sirius braces himself for whatever punishment is coming next. The slap was child's play, Walburga is usually far more creative. But when she waves her wand he feels nothing—no stinging or burning, no force pushing him back against the wall. After a few seconds there's the sound of fluttering. Letters slip under the dining room doors and pile up on the table between them. There must be nearly a hundred.

He looks at them then back at his mother, waiting for an explanation, but she only stares blankly at him.

“Er—what are these?” he asks, after several awkward minutes.

Her face remains expressionless. “Don’t you recognize them?”

He squints at her like maybe that will make her words clearer and then turns the same gaze on the letters. He realizes that they do actually look familiar. Stepping closer he sees that each and every one of them is addressed to Regulus. Addressed by him.

His head snaps towards his mother, his shock and betrayal clearly plain on his face because Walburga looks pleased.

“Did he—did he give you these?” He’d wondered why Regulus never responded, but he’d assumed it probably had to do with their mother. Never, however, had he considered that Regulus had been selling him out. Handing over his letters, letting her pry into his life. It felt like a violation. Like the worst kind of betrayal.

“Regulus is a good boy,” his mother goes on. “Does what he’s told. You on the other hand...” she gestures to the pile of letters. “Remus Lupin is a half-blood from a family full of half-bloods. And on top of that I am told that he is sickly.” She says that as though illness is a character flaw. Which, of course, to his mother it is. Strong blood breeds strong wizards, or so she says. Sirius is not sure there is any proof to back that belief up.

“You will cease to associate with him, do you understand?” his mother continues, oblivious to Sirius’s mounting rage. He put a lot in those letters. Figures the only thing his mother would care about would be the blood statuses of his best friends.

“Sirius?” she snaps. “Do you understand me?”

“He’s my friend,” he says through clenched teeth.

“Not anymore.”

It’s hard to describe all the ways those words tangle him up. The panic they cause to wrap around his chest, squeezing his ribs. A primal fear.

Don’t take him from me.

Please.

Please.

Sirius can’t describe what it is about Remus Lupin exactly. He just knows that the fear his mother has planted beneath his skin, that scratches and bites and never sleeps, goes quiet whenever he looks at Remus. Whenever he sits next to him. Or hears him laugh. Remus... settles Sirius. He doesn’t know what that means. He doesn’t really think about it much. But he craves it.

Don't take him from me.

Please.

Please.

"Do you understand me?" Walburga starts to tap her wand threateningly on the table and Sirius's eyes go right to it.

"Yes," he finally manages to say.

Because he does understand.

He has no intention of doing as she says.

But he understands.

She nods sharply. "Good. Wash and change before dinner," her eyes give him another once over, "you look ragged." Which is her way of saying "common."

Sirius only barely refrains from rolling his eyes as he walks out of the dinning room, taking the stairs two at a time in his haste to get to the safety of his bedroom. He's not at all sure what to do with the emotions swirling around inside him—fear, relief, betrayal, anger. He doesn't have much time to sort it out either, he's only just made it to the second floor landing when he runs right into Reg.

"Sirius!" his little brother somehow manages to turn their collision into a hug, sending them both careening into the wall. It's instinct that has Sirius hugging him back even though he kind of hates him right now.

"Kreacher told me you were back, I've been waiting out here for ages, what did mum want? What was the end of term like? Did Gryffindor win Quidditch? Did you get all the house points? Did you actually throw that cat in the lake like you said you would—Mrs. Norberry or whatever—"

"Norris," Sirius answers reflexively.

"Oh yeah, Norris."

Reg finally lets go, stepping back and beaming up at Sirius. His curls are all over the place and he's missing a tooth. He looks like a little kid, even to Sirius who is, admittedly, also a little kid. And suddenly Sirius feels the anger drain out of him.

Regulus blinks, brow furrowing, seeming to catch onto Sirius's mood for the first time. "What is it? What's wrong?"

Sirius shakes his head. "Nothing. I'm just tired Reg. I'll see you at dinner yeah?" he brushes past him, refusing to feel guilty about the dejected look on the younger boy's face. He'll have to be more careful what he says around him, but maybe that'll just be for the summer, maybe once Reg is at Hogwarts, away from this house, away from their parents, Sirius will be able

to bring him around. Reg'll be in Ravenclaw, Sirius is almost positive, he's never met a bigger nerd. That'll be good, he decides, even if he does think the Ravensclaws are a bit obnoxious, at least Reg'll have the chance to meet people he isn't bloody related to.

Sirius makes it to his bedroom, closing the door behind him and collapsing down onto his bed. He exhales. He'll write to James later, that'll make him feel better. He just needs to survive the summer—him and Reg both. Once they get to Hogwarts everything will be okay. He knows it will.

JANUARY 1977

He hears whispers. He's still too asleep to really take that in. To understand who's talking or what they're saying. But he hears whispers. And then he hears the door close.

It's not until Remus comes back to bed that Sirius realizes he left it in the first place. That the part of his body once covered by Remus is cold. There's a short pause before Remus kisses his temple and starts pulling away again.

"Where're you going?" Sirius slurs. He manages to open his eyes but only barely. It's dark, but not so dark that Sirius can't see that Remus has gotten fully dressed.

"Just—er—library."

Sirius blinks. Everything is swimming around in his head. He still isn't awake enough to tell if this conversation is even real or if it's a dream.

"Library?"

"Yeah—James just needs some help with something."

None of this makes any sense. It must be a dream. Which is weird because Sirius's dreams are usually much more fun than this. He squints up at Remus again. Usually Remus is more naked in Sirius's dreams.

"Quidditch?" is all Sirius is able to get out, reaching blindly for Remus and managing to get his fingers caught in his shirt, tugging him fully onto the bed

"Urgh," Remus practically falls on top of Sirius but Sirius doesn't mind. "He—Jesus Padfoot," Remus mutters as he tries to unlatch Sirius's fingers from his shirt. "He cancelled practice."

Sirius's eyes are suddenly wide open, and he lets go of Remus. "What?"

Remus pulls back, straightening out his shirt and looking a little sheepish. "Yeah. So. I'm gonna go help him. You go back to sleep."

“Help him what? Is he okay?” Sirius struggles to get up but Remus stops him, gently, but firmly, pushing him back down onto the mattress.

“He’s fine, it’s just school stuff, go back to sleep okay? I’ve got this,” he gives Sirius a small smile, hand slowly making its way up Sirius’s neck to his head, fingers running slowly through his hair.

“Cheating,” Sirius murmurs as his eyes grow heavy again. He loves this feeling—loves it when Remus plays with his hair—he wants to bottle this feeling and drink it like a fine wine.

“Mhm,” Remus hums.

“You’ll tell me what’s happening right?” Sirius mumbles even as his eyes close.

There’s a pause. A long one.

“Of course,” and then, “Go to sleep okay?”

“I am asleep,” Sirius says nonsensically, earning him a soft laugh that makes his belly warm.

Remus leans down and kisses him again. “Of course you are.”

By the time Sirius is properly awake Remus is gone and so is James. For a second Sirius just sits and stares at their beds and tries to figure out the feeling in his chest. Somehow heavy and empty all at the same time.

When did this happen?

he can’t help but think.

When did I start getting left behind?

It’s a stupid question, because, of course, he knows the answer. Sighing he picks up his pillow and launches it at Peter’s still sleeping form.

“Time to get up Wormtail,” he says, sliding out of bed and heading for the bathroom.

“You’re worse than my mum,” Peter mutters into his pillow as Sirius closes the door.

Despite his winging, Peter does get out of bed, taking the shower after Sirius with nothing but a grunt of acknowledgement. Of the four of them, Peter and Sirius are the least pleasant in the mornings. Both of them more or less zombies before they get some food. Which is probably why it’s not until they’re dressed and ready to leave that Peter finally realizes James and Remus aren’t there.

He looks around, bewildered for a moment before turning to Sirius. “What the hell?”

Sirius shrugs. "I have no fucking clue. Something about the library?" he pauses, trying to drag up his vague memories of Remus's departure. "James cancelled practice."

Peter's mouth actually falls open. "Is he dying?"

"Dunno," Sirius says around the lump in his throat. There's so much he doesn't know about James at the moment. It's a bit crushing if he's being honest. "C'mon," he says, walking towards the door. "Let's get some food yeah?"

Peter nods, following him down the stairs. "Cancelled bloody Quidditch," he mutters under his breath. "That's gotta be one of the signs of the apocalypse doesn't it?"

Sirius snorts. "Sure seems like it."

It's weird, sitting down to breakfast just the two of them. I mean, yes, of course, the four of them don't always eat together. But usually that's because something is wrong. Someone's sick or in trouble.

Something is wrong,

he can't help but think.

James just doesn't want to tell you what it is. James or Remus.

Sirius grimaces down at his eggs, suddenly feeling his hunger disappear. He pushes his plate aside, thankfully Peter is too engrossed in his own to notice. Almost out of habit Sirius's eyes end up trailing over the Slytherin table. He looks for the familiar head of black curls but doesn't find any. It's a bit odd, Reg is such a dweeb that he's almost never late for meals, but then, Rosier and Crouch aren't there either so it's possible his idiot friends are holding him up.

"Hey, sorry," Remus huffs as he drops into the seat next to Sirius, startling him out of his thoughts. "That took longer than I thought," he shoots Sirius a quick smile before reaching for the food in the middle of the table and piling it on his plate.

Sirius blinks, looking around. "Where's James?"

Remus's mouth pulls a little tight. "Uh—he—uh—stayed behind."

Sirius stares at him. "Stayed behind? In the library?"

"Yeah, I think," Remus doesn't look up from his breakfast.

Sirius keeps staring at him. If Remus had looked up maybe he would have noticed the pleading in Sirius's eyes. The "no" and the "please" and the "not you too." He's already been doing this with James for the past year. Vague answers, obvious lies, unexplained disappearances. Now he's getting it from Remus too. When did everyone in his life stop trusting him?

Can you blame them?

hisses the voice inside his head.

After what you did.

After Snape.

“What is he doing in the library?” Peter demands through a mouth full of food, interrupting Sirius’s spiral.

“Course work,” Remus says, still giving all his attention to cutting up his pancakes.

Peter raises his brow and looks to Sirius in a very “does that sound as ridiculous to you as it does to me?” kind of way, which, yes, it does. “Course work? Term only just bloody started.”

“It’s stuff from last term,” Remus looks up briefly and then away again. “He got an extension on it, wants to have it done before this term starts.”

“James needed an extension on work? Since when!”

Sirius appreciates Peter’s indignation.

Remus sighs. “Since now I guess. Can we talk about something else?”

“I guess,” Peter sends Sirius another look before turning back to his own breakfast.

But they don’t talk about anything else. Instead they just sit there in silence. At one point Sirius notices Lily walking out of the hall and has half a mind to follow her. Just to have some excuse to get away from this table. He hasn’t spoken to her since New Years Eve but he knows something happened between her and James. Another thing he’s not talking to Sirius about. Plus there’s still whatever’s going on with Mary and Reg. Automatically his eyes go back to the Slytherin table. Rosier and Crouch are there now but no matter how many times he scans the rows of green and silver Sirius can’t find Regulus.

“Hey,” Remus gently nudges him with his elbow, bringing his attention back to him. He’s finally looking at Sirius, eyes soft.

“Hi,” Sirius says stupidly, because Remus’s eyes always make him stupid.

Remus’s lips quirk up just a little, before he nods at Sirius’s still full plate. “Aren’t you gonna eat something?”

They’re holding eye contact longer than they probably should but Sirius can’t muster any desire to look away.

I’m sorry, he almost says.

Sorry I’m such a disappointment.

Eventually he shrugs, “I’m not hungry.”

It’s been almost a week.

After that breakfast Sirius makes a conscious effort to look for Regulus in the Great Hall. But Regulus never shows. Not that day or the next day or any day after that. So Sirius decides to check the map, and according to the map, Regulus Black is not currently at Hogwarts. That fact makes something curdle in Sirius’s stomach.

He thinks about telling Remus. About telling James. But James is out of it these days—pale and distant and barely listening to anything Sirius says. And Remus...well, it’s not like Remus isn’t keeping his own secrets.

Something else the map has told Sirius is that James and Remus really are going to the library. Which he supposes is some sort of relief. At least everything they’re telling him isn’t a lie. Though they’re going there to meet up with Lily Evans and Sirius honestly has no clue what to do with that information. He thinks about asking but decides against it. If they don’t want to tell him that’s fine. He isn’t going to beg. At least not yet.

Today, however, he isn’t using the map to spy on his best friend and his...Remus. Today he’s using it to track down his brother’s asshole friends. Evan Rosier walks by just as Sirius is tucking the map away in his waistband, pulling his jumper over top and jogging to catch up to him.

“Rosier,” Sirius says as he falls into step with him.

If Evan is startled he doesn’t show it, just looks over at Sirius and grins. “Well look at that, if it isn’t Sirius Black talking to little old me.”

“Thought I’d slum it today.”

Rosier throws his head back and laughs. “I bet you did.”

Sirius stares back at him, brow arched.

“Blimey, you know, I never saw it before, when people said you two looked alike but that expression?” another grin. “That expression I know well.”

Sirius rolls his eyes. “Where is he.”

“Ah, there it is.”

Sirius waits for more, but, of course, there is none. They squeeze by a pack of Hufflepuffs before starting up the stairs.

“Rosier—“

“Ooh, Reg does that too, gets all growly and shit. Honestly, the pair of you, leave some angst for the rest of us yeah?”

Sirius works to unclench his jaw. He knows that Rosier is trying to wind him up. Hell, he'd probably be acting the exact same way if their positions were reversed.

“Is he not coming back?” the question is harder for Sirius to ask than he would have thought. Some part of him has always secretly felt that as long as Regulus was at Hogwarts there was hope. That eventually he would realize that the world was so much bigger than Grimmauld Place, than Walburga. That he didn't have to be afraid of her. After all, that's what it did for Sirius.

That hope had dwindled, of course, over the years. But still, some part of him felt comforted that his little brother was here. Away from their mother. Away from whatever was happening in that house.

“Funny, you've never seemed all that concerned with where he was before?” Rosier says as they continue the winding climb to the astronomy classroom.

“Yeah well, new year new me,” Sirius says flatly, earning him another laugh from Rosier. Rosier somehow manages to fall between genuinely gleeful and malicious. It makes it hard for Sirius to get his bearing. He likes it better when they're just cursing one another.

“You sniffing around for old Dumbly huh? He send you to spy on us?” there's an edge of sincerity in Rosier's mocking tone. “If he did you're not doing a very good job. Not very sneaky.”

Something about the suspicion sticks with Sirius. “You think Dumbledore cares about Regulus?”

Rosier doesn't react, doesn't even look over at him, which is its own tell, in a way. Sirius's stomach clenches.

“He's off doing something for them isn't he?” Sirius asks, voice low. Again, no reaction. “Where?”

Rosier stops by the ladder up to the astronomy room, looking at Sirius for the first time. “Don't know,” he says casually, like they're discussing vacation plans. “Wouldn't tell you if I did, but I don't. I know he's not here. I know he's not at home. You do with that what you will,” he pauses, eyes running Sirius over, looking for something, though Sirius has no idea what.

“But if you wanna know if he'll be back...” Rosier shrugs. “If it were me? No way. But then, Reg has always loved this place more than he should.”

It's work for Sirius not to let his reaction to those words show on his face. He didn't know that, about Regulus.

“Alright well, fuck off would you? If you keep walking me to my classes the girls are gonna start getting jealous.”

Sirius isn't sure who he's inferring the girls will be jealous of but before he can ask Rosier is already scrambling up the ladder, letting the trapdoor slam shut behind him.

“Prongs and Moony MIA again?” Peter asks as he gets out of the shower.

Sirius is standing at the window practically vibrating with tension. With anger and frustration and fear. With all the things he can't do and all the things no one is saying. This is the third day in a row he's woken up alone in bed.

“Sirius?” Peter asks tentatively, standing beside him as he slides his book bag over his shoulder. “You alright?”

Sirius almost laughs.

Almost.

“I'm tired of this bullshit,” he says, hands clenched in his pockets.

Peter grimaces. “You talk to Moony about it? What they're doing?”

No. Not really. He's tried. He always gets stonewalled. Homework. Special projects. Trying to get ready for NEWTS. Sirius has stopped asking because he hates the way Remus's lies crawl under his skin.

“C'mon,” he says sharply, heading for the door.

“Breakfast?” Peter asks.

“No, not today,” he practically shoves a group of first years out of his way as he cuts across the common room. “Today we're going to the fucking library.”

It hurts to see them there. Heads bowed together. Like Sirius is suddenly on the outside looking in. How many times have the four of them been in that exact same position? Hunched over a table, trying to get the details of a prank ironed out or the charms for some big project. He aches for those days, those long nights. Wants desperately to be standing next to them. What he can't figure out, is why they don't seem to want him there too.

“What the hell?” he hears himself shouting across the library before he can stop himself.

It's all a bit of a blur after that.

“Sirius! Oh come on, Sirius would you just—can you just slow down for like a second? Jesus.”

“No,” Sirius says petulantly, storming through the castle with exactly zero idea where he’s going.

“Please, can’t we just talk?”

And that gets Sirius to stop. Swinging around and nearly knocking right into Remus who’d been jogging to catch up to him.

“Oh now you want to talk?” Sirius snaps.

Several emotions flicker across Remus’s face as he trips over his feet trying to stop. He’s all flustered, sandy hair sticking up in every direction, bag slipping off his shoulder, shirt untucked. Sirius loves this Remus. Loves all Remus’s.

Tell him, says the voice in his head. But he quickly dismisses the thought.

He doubts that Remus would believe him.

“Sirius—“

“Please don’t lie to me again because I swear I’ll lose it Moons. I’m not a fucking idiot.”

Remus huffs. “I know that.”

“Then why do you keep treating me like one?” it’s work for him to keep his voice down. They’re standing in the middle of the corridor, out in public, anyone could come by. Everything about this is reckless.

Remus makes a frustrated noise. “I’m sorry.”

“Brilliant.”

“Sirius.”

“What? Sirius what?” he demands. “You’re real good at saying my name Remus, but what the fuck comes after it? What am I supposed to do here? I mean, how exactly would you like me to handle this? You’re lying to me.”

“I know,” Remus says quietly.

“You’ve been lying for a while now I reckon, since before Christmas, since last year.”

Remus looks like he’s going to argue but Sirius doesn’t give him the chance.

“I’m not an idiot,” he repeats. “You think I don’t know something else is going on here? You really expect me to believe that you won’t tell me about the boy he’s seeing—“

“Keep your voice down, Jesus.”

“—just because he asked you to?” Sirius goes on, ignoring Remus’s warning. “Because I don’t fucking buy it, Remus.”

Remus is shaking his head, hands running through his hair, making it even more of a mess. Sirius has to fight the urge to reach out and smooth it back down. Remus opens his mouth several times but nothing ever makes it out. Leaving them in silence.

Sirius sighs. “Is it—is it because of last year?” he asks finally, voice cracking somewhere in the middle.

Remus instantly looks up, eyes wide. “What?”

“Is that why...” he waves at the library. “Is that why Evans is there and not me?”

“What?” Remus repeats.

Sirius fights against the tightness in his throat. “We’re never gonna get past that are we? Not really. You and James, you’ll never...” he shakes his head looking away, not able to finish that thought. “I fucked us all up didn’t I?”

“Oh, Sirius,” before he knows what’s happening Remus is stepping forward, wrapping his arms around him and pulling him in for a hug. Sirius doesn’t fight it, head dropping into the crook of Remus’s neck.

“I trust you,” he whispers into Sirius hair, the gentle words sending a shiver down Sirius’s spine.

“You promise?”

“I promise.”

Sirius lets himself relax a little further into Remus, his arms squeezing tight. “I miss you,” he confesses weakly.

Remus makes a wounded noise at the back of his throat. “God Sirius. I really want to kiss you right now.”

“We’re in the middle of the corridor.”

“I know,” Remus says, hand making slow circles against Sirius’s back. There’s a pause and then: “I understand why James is keeping secrets but I don’t think he should. Not anymore. I don’t want to lie to you. I need you to know that, okay? It just...it can’t be me. Who tells you. It can’t be me.”

Sirius sighs, pulling back out of Remus’s embrace, scrubbing at his face. “That sucks Remus.” Which doesn’t even begin to cover it but it’s the only word he can think of right now.

Remus gives him a weak smile. “I know. I’m sorry.”

It isn't really good enough. Nothing is solved. But then, as the king of shitty, useless apologies, Sirius isn't sure he's in any position to judge.

"Can we go get breakfast now?" he finds himself asking, too tired and underfed for all of this.

Remus's smile grows. "You betcha babe."

That manages to startle a laugh out of Sirius.

Nothing changes really.

Remus and James still disappear. Still stop talking when Sirius comes into the room. Regulus is still missing. Sirius isn't eating much.

"You wanna go watch the Quidditch match?"

Sirius looks up from the Transfiguration coursework he'd only half-heartedly been attempting on his bed. Remus stands in the doorway, looking a little bit shy. Sirius blinks.

"You wanna go watch Quidditch?"

Remus rolls his eyes. "Oh don't act like I don't watch every Gryffindor game."

"Depends on how loosely we're using the word watch." Now Remus is openly glaring at him and Sirius has to bit back a smirk. "You certainly attend every game."

"Alright."

"You get points for proximity, definitely."

"Are you done yet?"

"It's good to know that you're aware Quidditch is a visual event. Up until this point I was worried you thought it was auditory only, the way you're always looking literally anywhere but at the pitch."

Remus has his hands on his hips and Sirius is openly grinning now.

"Do you want to go or not?" he asks flatly.

Sirius slams his textbook shut, bouncing off his bed and towards a Remus who is clearly struggling to maintain his unimpressed demeanour. "I'd go anywhere with you darling," Sirius says smoothly, kissing Remus's cheek and enjoying the blush that instantly blooms there.

They walk out of the dorm room with Sirius's arm slung around Remus's shoulders.

The game is, Sirius doesn't think it's dramatic to say, a train wreck. Passes are missed. Bludgers are sent in the wrong direction. Players are unclear about their plays. James still puts on a good show, still scores, still flies better than anyone else out there, Mary not far behind him. But two people can't win a Quidditch match. You need a team. And the Gryffindor team is a mess.

"That was bad wasn't it?" Remus murmurs to him as the players file off the pitch, Ravenclaw celebrating a massive win as the dejected Gryffindors seem to be caught somewhere between complete astonishment and anger. Sirius can't blame them, he's never seen their team play that badly before.

"It was bad," Sirius confirms. And then, because maybe he's feeling a little petty: "That's what happens when you cancel practice."

Remus shoots him a look. "Yeah, maybe don't mention that to him."

Sirius only shrugs. He won't need to. James will know.

"Should we...?" Remus pauses near the tunnel to the locker rooms, nodding towards them. "Wait for him?"

Sirius takes one look down the tunnel before shaking his head. "Nah, he'll want to be alone. Time to cool down. I bet he's currently taking a very long shower."

Remus arches his brow but doesn't say anything, following Sirius out of the arena.

"Let's take the long way back yeah?" Sirius says, even though it's fucking cold out.

"Sure," Remus puts his hands in his pockets as the pair of them pull away from the parade of students walking towards the school. The sky is navy blue, stars just starting to blink into existence.

"You've never left him alone before," Remus says after a long period of silence, his breath freezing in front of his lips.

Sirius looks over. "What?"

"James," Remus clarifies. "When the team's lost before, you've always come back together. Sometimes...you know, slower than everyone else, but always together."

Sirius nods, trying to ignore the knot in his stomach. "Yeah, well, that was when I was on the team. It's different."

"How?" Remus asks.

"We were in it together I suppose." That's been them in most situations. At each other's backs. On the same side. Sirius has always thought he could take on just about anything as long as he knew James was with him.

“He still loves you, you know,” Remus says, correctly interpreting Sirius’s silence.

“Sure.”

“Sirius—“

“Can we not? I’m so tired of having conversations where no one says anything.”

Remus sighs, the pair walking a little further in silence before Sirius feels Remus lean against him. Just the slight press of their shoulders together. Letting his warmth bleed through Sirius’s too-thin leather jacket.

“It’s been tough, recently,” Remus says softly, “but it’ll get better. Once he finds him it’ll get better.”

Sirius feels his feet stutter to a stop. “What did you just say?”

Remus turns to him, brows drawn together. “I—that things will get better?”

Sirius feels nauseous, standing there in the cold, staring at Remus. “Once he finds him,” he repeats, lips numb. “You said once he finds him. James’s—the boy he’s been seeing, he’s missing?”

Remus blinks back at him, looking lost. “I—he—I shouldn’t have said that. Can we—“

“Answer. The. Question.” Sirius isn’t sure what it is in his voice that makes Remus go pale but he doesn’t take it back.

“Yeah,” Remus finally says. “Yeah, he never turned up after Christmas.”

Something is breaking inside of Sirius. He isn’t sure what it is exactly. Only that it makes him want to crawl into himself and never come out again.

“The Slytherin James is seeing,” his voice shakes, he doesn’t bother trying to control it. “The Slytherin boy James is seeing didn’t come back after Christmas.”

Sirius isn’t sure he’s ever seen Remus look so scared. “Sirius what—“

“Regulus,” the name chokes him. “Regulus. He’s seeing Regulus?”

He waits for Remus to contradict him. To tell him that he’s crazy. That James would never. He would never. He would never do that to Sirius. James who was there through all of it, through all the unanswered letters, and lonely summers and betrayals. There for every time Regulus went to Walburga. Sold Sirius out. Stood by and watched her take him apart. He would never.

Sirius reckons this is what it feels like to have your heartbroken.

He turns away from Remus, away from the school, and starts walking. He needs to be alone. He needs to get himself under control. There is too much noise in his head and his chest and

he wants to rip the world apart. He wants to set it all on fire. Everything in him is violence and rage and he just needs to go.

“Sirius,” Remus’s voice sounds wrecked. “Sirius—fuck—please, please let me explain, let me—“ Remus grabs hold of his arm and Sirius instantly whips around and shoves him back, sending Remus stumbling to the ground.

“You knew!” his voice is jagged edges. His voice is empty stomachs, and locked doors, and his mother’s handprint on his cheek. His voice is Regulus being such a good boy. “You knew for a year and you didn’t tell me, I can’t—you—“ Sirius takes a step back hands shaking, so desperate to punch and scratch and tear apart. Remus is still on the ground, looking up at him with pleading eyes.

“I know, I know, I’m sorry. Sirius I’m so sorry. I didn’t know what to do! I didn’t know—“

“Stop. Talking,” Sirius grounds out. “Just—just leave me the fuck alone Remus because I—I’m going to do something I’ll regret if you don’t, so just—” he’s barely able to get the words out, barely able to take another step back and then another and another until he’s practically running in the other direction.

It’s funny maybe, seeing as that’s what Reg is always accusing him of. Running away. This time is different though. This time he has no one to run to.

PART III REGULUS

Polyjuice is how they’ve been able to keep up the facade. Flasks are smuggled in and out by the cleaning lady who comes once a day to empty the chamber pot in the corner of the room. Well, chamber pot is generous. It’s really a bucket.

Except today she’s empty handed.

“Nothing?” Regulus asks, voice rough from lack of use.

She only shrugs. “They did not give me anything, I cannot bring anything.”

So now Regulus is pacing his tiny cell, heart beating about a mile a minute as he feels the potion wearing off. Wondering if he’s just been sold out. If he’ll be stuck in here forever. If the Dementors will still keep away once he has a different face. Not that they use their eyes really. They seem to just...feel you. Regulus shivers.

He wishes he’d asked more questions. Not that you can really ask the Dark Lord questions. Or Walburga for that matter. Seeing the two of them together, side by side at the end of the long dining table, had really been something else. Like walking into a nightmare.

Distantly he hears someone scream. That happens from time to time. From what he can tell prisoners here are kept fairly far apart, or at least he can’t hear anyone directly next to him.

But the screams still find you, undaunted by distance or walls. Regulus doesn't think he'll ever forget them.

He takes in a deep breath, having a panic attack is going to solve exactly nothing. He closes his eyes, standing in the middle of his cell and breathes. Just like he does back at Grimmauld Place, when it gets to be too much.

Inhale.

Exhale.

Inhale.

Exhale.

He pictures his flat with James. Pictures them curled up on the couch, covered in blankets, Regulus reading while James tosses his Quaffle up and down. He thinks about the dirty dishes in the sink they'll fight over later. Thinks about the record player that will make James pull Regulus dramatically to his feet, twirling him around their tiny living room. Regulus will pretend to hate it, he'll roll his eyes and huff, but eventually he'll hook his chin over James's shoulder and give in. Let James pull him close.

I am an excellent dancer, the James in his head says.

"I had to take ballroom classes for most of my childhood so I wouldn't get too cocky."

James laughs. Oh my God! Did you really? I can't believe I didn't know this. Why haven't you been trying to woo me with your dance moves?

"I didn't realize ballroom dancing was such a turn on for you."

Everything you do is a turn on for me.

Regulus lets out a laugh that somehow turns into a sob. Caught in his throat. It's hard but he swallows it down. Keeps his eyes closed and his cheeks dry. He can feel himself shrinking, feel his hair brush his ears and the back of his neck, feel his mouth and teeth become his own again.

Reg?

"I wish you were real," he whispers into the dark. Now that he's back in his own body he suddenly feels painfully vulnerable.

But I am real.

Regulus goes to speak when the sound of screeching hinges causes his eyes to fly open, his feet stumbling backwards at the sight of three hooded figures standing at the open door of his cell. At first he thinks the Dementors have finally come for him but it only takes a second for him to realize that that's not right.

One of the figures steps forward pulling back his hood and revealing a shock of ash blond hair. Lucius Malfoy gives Regulus a wolfish grin as the younger boy collapses against the back wall, sucking in the breath he'd been holding.

"Miss me?"

Regulus doesn't dignify that with an answer. "What're you doing?"

The two people behind him step forward as well, pulling back their own hoods, but Regulus doesn't recognize them. Two men, they're big, muscular, remind Regulus of bulldogs. He turns his attention back to Lucius.

"Isn't it obvious?" Lucius says with an infuriating amount of amusement. "I'm here to rescue you."

Regulus blinks, his too big clothes slipping off his shoulder as he tries to get his bearings. "The job is done?"

Lucius nods. "The job is done. You bought the Dark Lord the time he needed, he is very grateful, now, hop to."

"My wand," Regulus says as the three men turn towards the door.

Lucius looks back over his shoulder, giving Regulus another grin. "Ah, yes, of course." He tosses him his wand and Regulus fumbles before dropping it. Still awkward back in his own body, his depth perception off.

"Come along little prince, we mustn't dally," Lucius's posh accent feels absurd in this place.

Regulus tries not to trip on his trailing pant legs as he half-jogs after the others. Last time they were able to Apparate outside the prison so Regulus assumes that's where their headed until Lucius makes a sharp turn before the front doors.

Regulus's stomach lurches.

"Lucius?"

"Come along Regulus."

He pauses, eyeing the doors, desperate to walk towards them. Not that he could Apparate himself, but it would be a relief just to see the sky again. He doesn't even know what time of day it is.

"Regulus," Lucius calls warningly from up ahead and one of the bulldogs gives him a hard shove in the back.

Gripping his wand tightly Regulus tears his eyes away from the doors and starts walking again.

"What're we doing?" he hisses once he catches up to Lucius.

“Tsk, tsk, so demanding,” Lucius says flippantly, though his eyes aren’t on Regulus but on the cells to the right of them.

Most of the cells they pass are empty but some aren’t. Some have prisoners who look up at them with wide, terrified eyes. Which is not nearly as bad as the ones who look up without any light in their eyes at all. Eventually Regulus just looks at his feet, praying that whatever Lucius is up to it’s over quickly.

“Ah,” Lucius says happily as they come to stop in front of one cell in particular. “Here we are.”

The man inside looks around Lucius’s age, maybe a little younger, barely out of Hogwarts. He has floppy brown hair and big blue eyes. He quickly scrambles to his feet when he sees them, more alert than many of the other prisoners.

“Have you come to let me out? Did my parents finally get through to you? I didn’t do it, I promise I didn’t. I would never,” he steps towards the bars, babbling, clearly nervous. “I’m a herbologist, that’s all, I tend to plants for my father’s potions business. I’m not involved in any of this I swear.” He’s gripping the bars of his cell, practically trying to pull himself through.

“Please,” he goes on desperately. “Please, you have to believe me.”

Lucius smiles. It’s an expression Regulus has seen many times before. It isn’t...necessarily...pleasant. “Oh I do.”

“You do?”

“Yes,” Lucius says calmly.

The boy’s whole body relaxes and he all but collapses into the bars. “Oh thank Merlin. You don’t understand how scared I’ve been. I told the Aurors, I told them I would never—“

“Regulus,” Lucius cuts off the man’s ramblings and Regulus instantly goes stiff at being addressed. “Kill him.”

Regulus turns to Lucius, his mouth open, while the boy in the cell stumbles back, away from the bars. “What? NO! Who are you? I thought...you said you believed me! Who are you?”

But Lucius isn’t paying him any mind. He has eyes only for Regulus who is still staring at him in horror.

“Go on,” he says, like he’s asking him to set the dining room table.

“W-why?” Regulus finally manages to ask, the man in question is still babbling pleas for mercy in the background.

“It doesn’t matter,” Lucius sounds about as serious as Regulus has ever heard him. “The Dark Lord has requested that you do it so you will do it.”

“But why?” Regulus repeats desperately. “What’s he done? What’s the purpose?”

“I told you, it doesn’t matter.”

The screaming from early starts up again, the familiar cold that accompanies the presence of the Demnetors drifting over Regulus.

“Lucius—“

“Kill him,” Lucius steps forward. “Or I will kill him and then I will stuff you in there and leave you at the mercy of the guards.”

There is no trace of mockery, Lucius means every word, and Regulus doesn’t doubt that he has the blessing of Walburga to carry it out. She’ll not want Regulus back if he fails the Dark Lord’s test.

He closes his eyes briefly, feeling the cold inching closer. He should have known this had been too easy.

Swallowing, he turns towards the cell, wand raised. The man inside, who’s already backed himself against the wall, slides to the ground.

“No, please, please, please,” his voice is soft, desperate. “I’m a good man. I swear. I’m going to get married, please.”

Regulus’s hand is shaking and he’s almost positive he can’t do this. That he’s just going to come apart right here on the spot.

“Now Regulus,” Lucius commands.

Regulus tries to breathe.

“Please, please, please.”

“Regulus.”

You can’t save him.

“Please, please, please.”

You know you can’t save him.

“If I have to do this Regulus,” Lucius says dangerously. “You’ll never leave this place, do you understand?”

His arm is still raised, wand still aimed.

“I love her. I promised I’d come back. We’re going to start a family. Have mercy.”

“Regulus—“

“Avada Kedavra.”

Everything seems to go quiet after that.

Like the whole world has stopped. Regulus doesn't drop his arm even when the man across from him slumps over. Regulus is shaking so badly he's surprised the wand doesn't fall from his hands. He can't move. Can't breathe. Can't think

Everything is so quiet.

So still.

“Easy now,” Regulus flinches when Lucius touches him but doesn't pull away, doesn't quite have that level of control over his body at the moment. Lucius's touch is surprisingly gentle as he lowers Regulus's arm for him, keeping one hand on his back, stabilizing him.

“That was good Reg,” he says softly. “You did good.”

Regulus gives him one look before turning away and falling to his hands and knees, regurgitating what little is left in stomach.

He hears one of the bulldogs mutter something and the other laughs. He can't make out the words but he can imagine what they are.

“Oh shut-up Crabbe,” Lucius snaps. “Don't act like you didn't piss your pants the first time you killed someone.”

Killed someone.

Killed someone.

I killed someone.

Regulus quickly grabs hold of that thought and shoves it somewhere way down deep. He'll deal with it later, when he's not on his hands and knees on the floor of Azkaban Prison.

“C'mon Reg,” Lucius slides a hand under his arm and hauls him up. “We gotta go.”

“What did he do?” Regulus mumbles, as Lucius starts guiding him back towards the front doors.

Lucius gives him a sidelong look. “Just like he said. Mistaken identity.”

“Mistaken identity,” Regulus repeats.

“They thought he was one of ours, been questioning him for weeks, following a false lead. Think we've been tampering with potions ingredients or something equally ridiculous. They can't figure out what the Dark Lord's next move will be and it's making them reckless.”

Regulus tries to focus. It's difficult because his brain feels foggy. Shock, he thinks dimly.

“But why kill him then?” he asks, desperate.

“They were going to use Veritaserum on him in the morning. Find out the truth.”

“But if he’s not one of us then he can’t have any secrets to spill,” Regulus winces at the sound of another distant scream. He really needs to get out of here.

“No, but then the Aurors would realize they’d been chasing a dead end, and that would be inconvenient for us. This way there will always be that little bit of doubt, they’ll always wonder ‘was he a Death Eater or wasn’t he.’”

Regulus feels another wave of nausea crash over him. “A little bit of doubt,” he repeats. “That man’s life for a little bit of doubt?”

They stop at the doors, Lucius finally releasing Regulus’s arm as he turns to him fully, a wry expression on his face. “Oh come now Regulus, don’t look at me like that,” he reaches out and tucks a lock of hair behind Regulus’s ear.

“After all, you’re the one who killed him.”

Chapter End Notes

AHHH

Sirius knows! HE KNOWS. I'm dying. I've been dying since I wrote that. Like, I gotta be real with you guys, originally Sirius was never going to find out because I just felt like there was no way him and James would ever get past it. But here we are. Now he knows. So I guess we'll see.

ANYWAY I hope the timeline stuff wasn't too confusing and that you liked it etc. etc. !

Thank you always for the nice comments and also all your theories and thoughts, I love all of it!

Chapter 35

Chapter Summary

Warning: this chapter is very soft. Please handle with care.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

PART I: SIRIUS

He blinks awake, jaw cracking as he yawns. He cast a warming charm last night but it must have worn off because he can feel the chilly bite of the wind through the cracked, lifeless house. It's fine though, his fur keeps him warm enough.

He doesn't have proper thoughts as a dog.

Or proper feelings.

He's still him, still in control. But he's also...animal. Everything is filtered through this new body, these new senses, this new brain. He's still Sirius. He's just Sirius the dog not the boy. When things become too much, too hard to handle, it's easier being like this. Things hurt—if not less—than different.

His first real thought, as he comes awake, is Moony.

Moony, Moony, Moony.

This place smells so strongly of him, he's in the floorboards, the mattress, filling Sirius's nose and wrapping around his chest. He whines, burying his head more fully in the blankets piled around him.

Moony, Moony, Moony.

Even as a dog Sirius misses him. But he can't go to him. Can't talk to him. Can't talk to anyone. Sirius huffs, scratching at the mattress. He just wants to be a dog. To hunt and sleep and not have to feel that ache in his chest every time he remembers that the most important people in his life have been lying to him.

It's funny really, that it's Regulus who has once again proven to Sirius that he can't place his trust in other people. Maybe he planned it this way. It would be so like their mother, to try and teach him a lesson by seducing his best friends away from him.

When will you learn brother? he can hear Regulus's snide voice so clearly that his lips actually curl back, teeth baring themselves at the very thought of him.

Everyone lets you down, the voice goes on. Everyone is out for themselves. I mean, how could you be so stupid? After everything? This is why the Dark Lord will win. Dumbledore's supporters are nothing but a bunch of disappointments and morons.

Another whine escapes Sirius without his permission.

No.

He can't go back.

Can't face any of them.

So he'll stay here. For now.

Hunt and sleep and wander around the forest. Then come back and lie in blankets that smell like Remus and pretend it doesn't feel like breaking apart.

PART II JAMES

James is a wreck.

Has been since Christmas. Maybe even before then.

He feels himself being torn in a million directions. Or maybe more accurately, in two directions, but with the force of a million hands. Sirius or Regulus. Who does he go after? Who does he fight for? Both, his thoughts insist vehemently. I love them both. I need them both. But he isn't sure life works like that.

Last night is a blur:

"Maybe we should go to Dumbledore?" Lily had suggested while she watched James pace the Prefect office once he could no longer bring himself to stare at the map. At the spot the Quaffle was hovering over.

"I don't know," James had said. Because he really hadn't. He knew Regulus wouldn't want that, that he didn't trust Dumbledore, and James wasn't sure he was wrong not to.

"He might help—it can't be—they can't keep kids in Azkaban can they? There's no way that's legal."

James had made a noncommittal noise. As far as he knew there were no hard and fast rules about who could and couldn't be put in Azkaban, as long as their crime was bad enough. But what could Regulus have done? Alice said the Pureblood families were almost untouchable, so why had they allowed this to happen? All he could picture was Regulus alone in a cell. Was a Dementor hovering above him sucking the life out of him.

“James,” he’d heard the door open almost at the same moment that he’d heard his name—cracked and desperate. One look at Remus was all he’d needed to know something was very very wrong.

Without thinking James had immediately stepped towards him. “What is it? What’s happened?” His voice had come out soft, Remus pale, eyes red-rimmed. Remus did not cry easily.

“It’s—he—” but he’d cut himself off, looking frantically at Lily.

“Evans can you give us a minute?” James had asked, not taking his eyes off of Remus.

“Oh—yeah, of course. Just—er—let me know if there’s anything I can do okay?”

“I will, and thank you, again,” he’d met her eyes briefly as she passed him on her way to the door.

“Fuck James, fuck,” Remus said the minute she was gone. “I didn’t mean to. I messed it all up. I don’t know what to do.”

“It’s okay, whatever it is it’s okay, just sit down alright?” James guided him to the couch while words continued to spill out of his mouth.

“I don’t know where he is. I checked the map but I can’t find him. I should have followed him but he was so angry with me—” his voice shook and cracked and fell apart, his words unravelling.

“Remus, breathe,” James said calmly, placing a steadying hand on his friend’s shoulder. “What is it? What’s happened?”

Remus shook his head, tears in his eyes again, breaking James’s heart. “He knows,” he’d whispered, sending something cold down James’s spine. “Sirius knows.”

Now. Sitting in the Great Hall at Breakfast, Remus silent beside him, Peter glancing nervously between them, Sirius still missing, James has the overwhelming desire to hear his mother’s voice. To be held by her. Told what to do. He tried to handle this himself, tried to fix things, and all he’s done is make everything worse. He’d done a half-hearted search for Sirius last night but Remus was right, he wasn’t on the map, James wasn’t sure if he’d gone into town or what. He also wasn’t sure what he would do if he found him.

Apologize?

Beg for forgiveness?

Ask for his help?

Look, I know you’re angry at me, but your brother is currently in Azkaban and I don’t know what I’m supposed to do about it.

In the end it didn't matter. He couldn't find him.

Remus drops his fork onto the eggs he'd been pushing around his plate for the last fifteen minutes. "I'm gonna go look for him."

"Did you guys have a fight or something?" Peter asks from across the table.

Remus sighs. "Yeah," he runs a hand over his face, voice cracking. "Yeah, we had a fight and I need to just—" James knocks his foot against Remus's under the table, letting him know that he's there.

"I'll come with you."

Remus gives him a watery smile. "I'm not sure if that'll make it better or worse."

"Me either," James says honestly. "But I'm not sure I want you dealing with this alone."

"I'll help too!" Peter pipes up. "Obviously."

James watches Remus send him a wary look. "Listen, Pete—" But James puts a hand on his shoulder, stopping him.

"It's okay, I'm done lying," he tells him, as causally as he can manage while his heart hammers in his chest. "What's the point anymore?" though he still does a quick check with his eyes to make sure no one is sitting near enough to listen in.

"Lying about what?" Peter demands, starting to sound slightly exasperated.

"Are you sure?" Remus asks.

James just nods, letting out a deep breath. "Listen, Pete, I don't know how to really...break this news gently but—er—I'm seeing Regulus."

Peter looks back at him, expression blank, causing something heavy to form in the pit of James's stomach. He opens his mouth to try and explain when Peter suddenly smiles, shutting James up immediately.

"Um, yeah," he says, the "duh" clearly implied by his tone. "I know?"

"You know?" James and Remus say at almost the exact same time.

Peter looks between them like he can't figure out why they're so confused. "Yeah?"

James struggles to get his thoughts in order, a laugh that borders on hysterical falling from his mouth. "How do you know?"

Peter shrugs, biting into his buttered toast and chewing thoughtfully. "Well," he says, before swallowing, "for starters, you look at him like you want to eat him every time Slytherin plays Quidditch."

If James had been drinking he would have done a spit take. As it is, he makes several spluttery-choking noises, while Remus actually has the audacity to laugh.

“Plus there’s been a lot of references to a mysterious “he” who’s apparently in Slytherin since you went and broke into their bloody dorm after the party that one time,” he shrugs. “Just put two and two together I guess.”

James is still struggling to come up with something to say, scrubbing his face with his hands. “And you’re...okay with it?” he finally manages, because he can’t quite believe that Peter is willing to just shrug this off.

The other Marauder wrinkles his nose. “Well, I mean, I’d rather not watch you snog him. But as long as that’s off the table...I don’t see how it matters to me who you get with. I mean, it’s weird as all hell, but...” he shrugs.

James shakes his head, turning to find Remus in a similar state of shock. “Jesus Peter,” he finally manages, smiling for the first time in what feels like days. “You really are full of surprises, huh?”

“I guess,” Peter says, sounding unconvinced as he continues to chew on his breakfast.

“Okay, well, as wild as this revelation has been,” Remus sounds tired if not slightly amused. “I’m gonna go back to the room, check the map again, see if anything’s changed.”

James nods, pushing back from the table as both him and Remus get to their feet. “I’m done, I’ll come with you.”

“Guys, give me like five seconds!” Peter says urgently.

“You know we’re just going upstairs right? You can meet us there.”

“Or you could just wait!” Peter says indignantly, through a mouth full of beans.

James rolls his eyes. “Okay, but just so you know, if you choke you’re gonna have to find someone else to give you the Heimlich, because there is no way—

“James,” the tone of Remus’s voice grabs James’s attention immediately and when he looks over he finds him wide eyed and tense.

“Remus? What is it?” but Remus just shakes his head, swearing softly under his breath.

“Is he having a stroke?” Peter demands, somehow still with his mouth full.

“I don’t—“ James starts when a noise across the room catches his attention and he looks over without thinking. Just instinct. Looks over and feels his whole body jolt like he’s just been thrown head first into a wall.

“Oh,” James says weakly, his legs actually giving out under him as he promptly sits back down at the table, watching Regulus across the room, walking towards his friends. James has

had this fantasy so many times over the last two weeks. Imagined this exact scenario. He's not so sure he isn't imagining it now.

Regulus looks thin and pale, but he's there. He's walking. He isn't in Azkaban, isn't having the soul ripped out of him. It takes everything in James not to call out his name.

"What is it? What's going on?" Peter asks looking around, but James can't speak, can't take his eyes off of Regulus, afraid that if he does he'll disappear again. If it weren't for the fact that Remus could clearly see him too James would have thought he was hallucinating.

Come on, James thinks as he watches Evan Rosier get up and give Regulus a hug. Come on. Look over here. Find me. Please.

Like he'd heard him, Regulus turns his head, eyes searching the Gryffindor table for only a second before they lock with James's. God that hurts. Makes something with claws start to scratch the inside of James's chest.

And then it's gone. Regulus turning away, sitting down with his friends. James feels like he's just run a mile, breathing in deep as he does his best to catch his breath.

Remus squeezes his arm. "Go on, go to him."

James just shakes his head. "I can't. Not here." But God does he want to.

"Go wherever it is you do, he'll follow, I'd bet anything," Remus gives him a sad smile and James finds himself searching his friend's face.

"Sirius?" he asks finally.

"Me and Pete will find him. You won't be any use now anyway," he nods his head in Regulus's direction. "Go on."

Feeling oddly numb James stands back up. "Yeah, okay, thank you."

"Of course," Remus says, and then; "James? Be careful, alright?"

James nods. "Yeah," he looks briefly over at the Slytherin table and then back to Remus, "Yeah I will. You too."

Remus lets out a huff. "I can handle him I promise." James knows that it's so much more complicated than that but there's no point arguing.

"I'll be back—I'll come find you okay? Don't do anything stupid," and then, with a half-hearted grin. "Not without me yeah?"

"Sure James," Remus says softly. James isn't at all sure that this is the right decision, but he does know that he'll never be able to concentrate now. Not until he speaks to Regulus. Not until he's able to touch him. To make sure he's real. To make sure he's okay.

He nods at Peter before squeezing Remus's shoulder and heading out of the Great Hall on shaking legs.

He isn't sure if Regulus even sees him leave, but the truth is, if he stays in that room for another second he's probably gonna do something stupid. Like kiss Regulus. Like cry. So he escapes to the Come and Go Room, heart aching the moment he steps inside and feels its warmth. It's been a little over a month since he was last here.

He pauses at the door, letting it all hit him, the memories and feelings that this room is saturated in. Then he takes a shaky breath in and sits on the end of the bed, resting his elbows on his knees and dropping his head into his hands.

"He's okay," he tries to tell himself, tries to get himself to believe. "He's okay, he's okay, he's okay." He takes in a deep breath and lets it out slowly. He's been so fucking scared, spending every minute since he'd last seen Regulus worrying. Knowing that Reg wasn't safe and that there was nothing he could do about it—even before he went missing. He squeezes his eyes shut. "He's okay, he's okay, he's okay." It comes out like a prayer, though James doesn't know who wizards pray to. After all, they don't need faith. They have magic.

The door opens and James's head shoots up, nearly tripping as he gets to his feet. Regulus is there, standing in front of the door, so fucking close James can't breathe. For a minute they just stay like that, staring at one another, the air filling up with something that buzzes and sparks and begs to be touched. But James doesn't know what to do, he's held in place by Regulus's eyes, by his stare, by all the things he feels for him.

It's Reg who steps forward eventually, breaking the moment apart as he walks right up to James, throwing his arms around his torso and pressing his face into his chest. James doesn't hesitate, instantly hugging him back.

"I have you," he whispers as he presses desperate kisses to the top of Regulus's head. "You're safe, you're safe, I have you."

Regulus doesn't answer, just squeezes tighter, trembling in James's arms and James has to fight back the burning in his eyes because he knows Reg needs him to be strong and he can do that. He can. For this boy he can push all the rest of it aside.

"I love you, you're safe, I promise," James's mouth is running away with itself, he isn't even entirely sure what he's saying only that he wants Regulus to know that he's there.

"Are you real?" Regulus asks after a few minutes, voice small and muffled by James's shirt.

James almost laughs, because honestly he could ask Regulus the same question. "Yeah," he says instead. "Yeah I'm real."

"Promise?"

James plants another kiss on the top of his head. "Promise."

Eventually James shuffles them towards the bed, wrapping them up in the warm blankets and holding Regulus to his chest. His hands rub soothing circles into his back as he continues his running monologue of comfort. After a few minutes Regulus tilts his head back, looking up at him.

“Hey,” James says softly. “Hey, hi, how are you?” his hands cup Regulus’s face, thumbs brushing against his cheeks.

Regulus’s eyes flutter closed at the touch. “You know,” he croaks, sounding a bit more like himself, “there was a second there, where I thought I’d never see you again.”

James swallows around the lump in his throat. “Yeah,” he whispers, “me too.”

Regulus’s eyes open again, as beautiful and intense as always. “I wanted to come back.”

“I know,” James says, because it’s true.

“I thought you might...” James watches him fight with the words in his mouth. “I know I’ve disappeared on you before. But I told you I wouldn’t do that again. And I don’t want to break my promises anymore. Especially not to you.”

James kisses his forehead, his cheek, his nose, his chin. “This okay?” he asks. Regulus nods, eyes closed again, face still in James’s hands.

“I imagined you were with me,” he says breathlessly. “It helped.”

James’s heart aches. “What did you imagine?” he asks quietly.

“Us, our home,” Regulus says, nuzzling against James’s palm, before turning to press a kiss there.

“Our home?”

“Mm, what it would look like—be like—if we had one. A flat in London.”

James wrinkles his nose. “In London? Why?”

“Close to Quidditch.”

James almost laughs. “Ah of course. You do realize we’re Wizards right? So really anywhere is close to Quidditch if we want it to be.”

Regulus cracks one eye open to glare at him and James has to bite the inside of his cheek to keep from smiling.

“Are you really going to nitpick my fantasy?”

“No, sorry. Tell me about our flat in London.”

Regulus closes his eyes again, humming contently. “It’s small and cozy. Lots of carpets and blankets and pillows. Lots of fireplaces—though only one of them is connected to the Floo and we keep it off most of the time.”

James isn’t sure what to do with the information that Regulus’s fantasy involves cutting himself off from the Wizarding world as much as possible.

“You make a mess, obviously.”

James snorts. “Obviously.”

“But you make up for it by cooking me hamburgers the Muggle way.”

That feels like a punch to the gut. That Regulus remembers what he wrote in his letter. That he liked it. Wanted that too. Wanted everything James saw for them. He knows they’re young. He does. But he can’t help it, imagining his future with Reg.

“I’d learn to cook other things for you,” he says finally, thumb stroking Regulus’s cheek. “If you wanted.”

“You can’t cook too much though,” Regulus says seriously. “Kreacher will get upset.”

That makes James pause. “Kreacher?”

“My house elf.”

“Right, but wouldn’t he, you know, stay with your mum? At Grimmauld?”

Regulus’s eyes open, voice surprisingly serious considering nothing they’re discussing is real. “I couldn’t leave him there. Not with her. I couldn’t leave him behind.”

There’s something heartbreaking about those words, though James can’t decide if it’s the love Regulus has for his elf, or if it’s the pain he clearly feels about being left behind.

“Okay,” James leans forward, kissing him softly. “I won’t cook too much.”

They lie there in silence for a moment, the outside world disappearing, becoming something fuzzy and far away. Something that can’t touch them. And James luxuriates in the warmth of Regulus’s body in his arms. The weight of him. The same monologue on loop in his head.

He’s okay.

He’s okay.

He’s okay.

There’s a shift in Regulus before he speaks again. James can feel it. Can feel him trying to put up his walls, to protect himself from James’s reaction. He wants to tell him not to, that he doesn’t need to. Not with James. Not after all this time. But he knows it would only make it worse. So instead he waits.

“I was in Azkaban,” Regulus says finally, and even though James already knew that he still feels his breath hitch.

He nods, chin brushing Regulus’s curls. “I know.”

Regulus instantly pulls away, looking up at him with wide eyes. “You know? What do you mean you know?”

James tries to pull him back down but it’s no use, Regulus is already sitting fully upright, blankets pooling around his waist. James sighs, pulling himself up too.

“You didn’t think I was just going to sit around and do nothing did you?” he gives Regulus a self-deprecating smile.

“What did you do James?” he sounds worried, which, James supposes isn’t entirely unwarranted.

“Developed my own tracking spell,” like it’s no big deal.

Regulus blinks back at him. “You—what?”

“We used the Quaffle you made me to track your magical signature. The minute you used magic we were able to find you.”

Regulus still looks confused. “But I wasn’t using magic, I didn’t have my wand.”

James shrugs. “Well you must have at some point because—“ he cuts himself off as Regulus’s face goes abruptly pale, the change so quick James is certain he’s going to pass out.

“Oh,” the next second Regulus is scrambling out of the bed, practically falling onto his hands and knees as he vomits on the floor.

James moves without thinking, sitting beside him and holding his hair away from his face. “You’re okay, it’s okay,” he says softly, even though he has absolutely no idea what is going on.

Even after the vomiting stops Regulus remains on his hands and knees just breathing. James reaches for his wand and vanishes the mess.

“Okay?” he asks, hand on Regulus’s back, he still looks frightfully pale as he leans back against the bed, bending his knees and dropping his head between them.

“Sorry,” he says weakly.

“For what? You don’t need to—you don’t need to apologize to me Reg.” Just tell me what I said, he almost asks, just tell me what happened to you. Though, to be honest, he’s not sure he could bear hearing it, not sure he could bare knowing that more damage had been done to this boy that he loves so much. More damage he couldn’t protect him from.

Eventually Regulus lifts his head. “That means you didn’t find me until last night?”

James nods. “Yeah.”

Regulus smiles dryly, loosening some of the tension in James’s chest even though when he speaks his voice still sounds strained. “And what exactly were you planning to do with that information? Break into Azkaban?”

“I was thinking about it,” James shrugs, because he had been.

Regulus laughs weakly. “Of course you were,” a few moments of silence pass before he lets out a deep breath, shoulders slouching forward. “I’m glad you didn’t. I’m glad you weren’t there. I don’t want you to ever—“ but he cuts himself off, shaking his head.

“Reg,” James says softly, hand going to the back of his neck, he feels Regulus sag into his touch. “What happened?” he can’t help it.

Regulus’s mouth turns down as he shakes his head. “No—I—can’t—I—“

“Shh,” James squeezes his neck lightly. “It’s fine, I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have asked. You don’t have to tell me, okay?”

Regulus nods, breathing in and out slowly. “Thank you.”

“Of course.”

They sit side by side on the floor, James in no hurry to move, happy just to be near him. Eventually Regulus leans into James body, resting his head on his shoulder, James’s hand sliding down around his back, pulling him close.

“Reg,” he sighs eventually, chin resting on the top of his head. “There’s something I have to tell you.”

Regulus laughs without humour. “Of course there is.”

James swallows, throat tight. He’s not sure how Regulus is going to react to this but he’d rather he hear it from him first, so he has time to prepare himself before it all inevitably blows up.

“Sirius knows.”

There’s a beat of silence.

“Sirius knows what?”

James sighs.

“He knows about us.”

PART III REMUS

Remus stands in front of the whomping willow, watching Peter scurry through the grass towards the knot in the trunk. He's embarrassed that he didn't think of it earlier. Or at all, for that matter. It was Peter who suggested it, after they had once again fruitlessly searched the map for Sirius's name.

It's so obvious. Remus doesn't know how he missed it. Except maybe that he tries not to think about the Shack. Tries to forget it exists. Forget why this big hulking tree has been planted here in the first place. It's never occurred to him that the Shack could act as actual shelter and not just a glorified cage.

The tree branches slow to a stop and a minute later Peter is back, transforming into himself again.

"Sure you don't want me to go with you?" he asks, straightening up, breath heavy after the run.

"No, thanks. If he's in there I think...I think it's probably best if it's just me."

Peter nods, not looking the least bit put out at the idea of missing the altercation.

"Well alright then," he claps Remus good naturedly on the back. "Good luck."

Remus shoots him a weak smile. "Thanks."

He hates every step he takes towards the Willow. Every step along the dark, damp passage underneath it, every step into the dusty, creaking house. He's trembling by the time he reaches the top of the stairs.

"Sirius?" he calls out, resisting the urge to pull out his wand. He strains his ears but he can't hear anything—well, besides the wind. It's freezing in here, his teeth already chattering as he walks along the hallway towards the bedroom. In the light of day he can make out more of the faded wallpaper. Of the desperate scratches on the walls. He shivers. Most of them are old. From his first and second year, before he had the others. Though some are undoubtedly also from last year.

He tenses when he reaches the bedroom but it's empty, just like the rest of the house. Remus sighs, sagging against the doorframe. It'd been a good idea, better than any Remus had been able to come up with, but still wrong.

He's stepping back into the hallway when he hears it—a door, steps on the floor, heading for the stairs. Something isn't right though, the steps clatter, like heels on hardwood, and there are too many of them, coming too fast. It isn't until he sees the dark head cresting the top of the stairs that he realizes, of course, what the reason must be.

"Oh," Remus says stupidly, as a large black dog comes to an abrupt halt at the other end of the hallway. "Hi."

There's another moment of silence before Padfoot growls, baring his teeth and flattening his ears.

Remus arches his brow. "Are you going to bite me Sirius?" he asks, with more bravado than he feels. "You think I'm afraid of teeth? Of claws? Me?" he almost laughs, opening his arms wide. "Go on then, what's a few more scars right?"

The growling promptly turns into a whine that's so pitiful Remus almost takes it back. But before he can speak again Padfoot is moving, he brushes past Remus and goes into the bedroom behind him without so much as a sniff in his direction. Remus takes a deep breath before following after him.

Padfoot is curled up in the corner, back to the door and therefore also to Remus. Remus watches him for a few moments before sighing.

"I'm sorry."

Padfoot huffs.

"I know. Believe me I know. I just—I mean at first I was in shock, and everything between us was so back and forth last year that I hardly wanted to add to that—"

Padfoot growls and Remus doesn't need words to know why. Whatever else they were, they were friends first. Family. Remus should have told him. Should have made James tell him. No excuse can make up for that failure of loyalty.

"I know," he repeats desperately. "Look, I told him it was fucked up okay? I told him not to do it but you know James," he stares at the dark mass in front of him, head still buried. "I didn't want to hurt you. But I didn't want to hurt him either."

Nothing. No more grumbling, no barking, not even the twitch of his tail or ears. The house is silent.

"Sirius," Remus whispers finally. "Please."

If anything, Sirius seems to curl more into himself. Like he's trying to disappear. Remus feels the desperate desire to reach out to him, to burry his face in his fur, but he refrains. Maybe he should leave, give Sirius the time that he clearly needs. The problem is, Remus can't quite make himself walk out the door. It's as though everything in him is pulling him towards the black dog in the corner.

"They're not just fooling around," he says finally. "I'm sure you don't want to hear that but I'm also sure that you know it already since James is your best mate and you and I are both well aware that he's never had a casual emotion in his life," and since Remus continues to get the silent treatment he decides to keep going, feeling an uncomfortable mix of emotions pressing against the inside of his skin.

"I thought that Regulus was just using him to get at you, but he isn't. Fuck Sirius, they love each other. I mean properly love each other. So I don't know what I was supposed to do? It

was wrong to lie, I know it was, but I couldn't break James's heart like that, not when I knew that it was something real."

It happens so fast that Remus barely has time to process it. One second Sirius is a dog and the next he's breathing heavily on the floor, clumsily pushing himself to his feet. That he's still angry is clear but Remus feels his heart skip at the sight of him anyway. At the sight of his Sirius.

"Regulus doesn't love him," Sirius says, voice all twisted, though whether that's from anger or the transformation Remus doesn't know.

"I know you don't want—"

But Sirius cuts him off. "What I want is irrelevant, clearly," he sneers at the last word. "Regulus doesn't love him, Regulus doesn't love anything but himself. That's why he will always choose them. The family."

Remus knows that Sirius feels betrayed, feels abandoned by Regulus, who handed him over to their mother time and time again. Who turned his back when Sirius cried out for help. He also knows that Sirius doesn't hate his brother. No matter what he says. Because none of that would hurt so much if he did.

"Sirius—"

"He has the Mark."

Remus's whole body goes cold. "What?"

"He has the Mark," Sirius practically spits on the floor. "I told you. He chooses them. Every time he chooses them."

"How do you know?" Remus asks desperately. He isn't concerned for Regulus, but James—James won't recover from this. Not if it's true.

"I've seen it."

Remus closes his eyes briefly. "Fuck" he hisses under his breath, taking a few seconds to appreciate what an absolute clusterfuck of a situation this is before he speaks again. "Regulus does love him," he says wearily and without really knowing why.

Sirius scoffs.

"His Patronus," Remus goes on, opening his eyes so he can see the confusion flicker across Sirius's face. "Regulus's Patronus is a Stag."

For a moment neither of them speak, and then Sirius starts shaking his head.

"No—it can't—and even if it is, so what? That's just—that's just a stupid myth—it isn't real, it doesn't mean anything." There's a sort of desperation in Sirius's voice that Remus doesn't understand. Why, he wants to ask, why is it so important that Regulus doesn't care?

“It’s real,” Remus says, “It’s in our textbooks.” But Sirius is still shaking his head.

“It’s the kind of bullshit story you tell kids, Patronuses and soulmates, it’s a fairytale, it doesn’t—” Sirius goes silent as Remus raises his wand.

“Expecto Patronum.”

There’s a bright flash and then that flash grows legs and feet and a tail, running circles around Remus before it bounds across the room and sits at Sirius’s feet. Sirius stares down at the dog and then back up at Remus, eyes wide.

“I’d been afraid,” Remus has to stop and clear his throat, his voice too tight, “in class,” he clarifies, “to really try. Afraid it would be a werewolf. But after I found out about Regulus I thought...” he trails off, shrugging and then after a minute he smiles, even if it is a bit fragile. “As soon as I saw him I thought “of course” you know? Of course it’s y—you.” He stutters on the last word, Sirius still staring at him like he can’t believe what he’s seeing.

“So I know it’s real,” Remus presses on, fidgeting under Sirius’s gaze. “Because I know how I feel about you and it’s—” he exhales, trying to get his words in order. “I think it was inevitable, me loving you. Does that make sense? Like I was always going to love you no matter what. Even if we never met, never sat in that compartment together, never got sorted into the same house or the same dorm. Even if I never knew you existed you would still be the person I loved and I would spend my whole life wondering where you were,” he swallows. “I don’t just love you because you’re here. I don’t just love you by accident. I love you because I was always going to love you. In this life and the next life and the one after that. The universe could have placed us on different planets and it would still be you.”

The phantom dog gives a little bark, his tail wagging enthusiastically as he paws at Sirius’s feet. Remus watches the anger bleed out of Sirius as he sags back against the wall behind him, closing his eyes.

“It’s the same. I feel the same,” he says, sounding incredibly tired. Despite it all, those words make Remus’s heart skip.

“Yeah?”

Sirius opens his eyes, looking right at him. “You really think you’re in this alone?”

Sometimes,

Remus thinks before he can stop himself.

Sometimes you feel so far away.

But instead all he manages is; “I don’t know.”

Sirius huffs, like he’s still a dog. “I love you Remus, I love you too fucking much.” Something about his tone doesn’t sit right with Remus.

“You don’t make that sound like a good thing?”

Sirius sighs, running a hand through his hair. “I don’t want to do this forever.”

Remus’s chest squeezes. “Do what?” he whispers.

“Hurt each other.”

The dog at Sirius’s feet flickers and then goes out, dissolving into a faint mist. Remus honestly doesn’t know what to say, but for the first time all day Sirius seems willing to talk.

“I hurt you with Snape, you hurt me with Regulus. I mean, is this what it’s going to be like? Just letting each other down for the rest of our lives? Because I don’t think I can handle it Moons. It’s too fucking painful.”

Something desperate is clawing at Remus’s chest. Because he can’t lose him. He doesn’t have anything else. Doesn’t have a mum, doesn’t have a home, or a future, shit, he barely has a dad. Loving Sirius is the only thing that feels like his anymore. And he knows that he’ll always have to share him with James, but he’s made peace with that, because James will never get to kiss the freckle just below Sirius’s left ear, or feel the way Sirius’s hands tremble for the first few seconds after they find skin, like it’s a thrill every time. He’ll never know how Sirius tastes. Those things will always be Remus’s and they’re enough. More than enough.

“Are you...ending things?” Remus finally forces himself to ask.

Sirius gives him a humourless smile. “No, I can’t. I think maybe I should, but I—“ he breaks off, shaking his head, gathering his thoughts. “It’s like you said. Loving you is inevitable. No matter where I am or who I’m with. It’ll always be you, I think.”

Somehow those words hurt and heal in equal measure. “But you want to? You wish you could?” he pushes, because he needs to.

Sirius sighs. “I just don’t understand how we ended up here,” he says honestly. “And I don’t know how we’re ever going to get out. Because you don’t trust me—“

“I do,” Remus takes a step forward, desperate. To convince Sirius. To convince himself.

“No,” Sirius says softly. “You don’t, and that’s okay, really, I get it. But now...now I don’t know if I trust you either.”

A wounded noise comes out of Remus before he can get himself under control and Sirius looks up at him with sad eyes.

“So where do we go from here?”

It takes a minute before Remus realizes that the question isn’t rhetorical, that Sirius is genuinely hoping for an answer. And God does Remus wish he had one. He wracks his brain, trying to find something, anything, but his parents weren’t exactly the paragon of a healthy relationship and he finds that he actually has no idea how this is supposed to work. How you’re supposed to love someone.

“I don’t know,” he says eventually, feeling helpless.

Sirius nods. “Me neither.”

A tense moment of silence passes, the winter wind whistling through the rotting house.

“Do you—“ Remus has to stop to clear his throat. “Do you want me to go?”

Sirius looks up at him and after a long minute shakes his head. “Stay? I can’t—I can’t go back yet. I can’t face him, I’m not—“ he squeezes his eyes shut, hands in fists. “I’ll lose it, I know I will. I just, I need more time to figure out how to....” he lets out a breathy laugh that lacks any semblance of joy. “How to live with this.”

Remus nods as Sirius’s eyes open again.

“But I’d like it if you stayed.”

Remus doesn’t need to be asked twice, he walks over to Sirius’s side of the room, sliding down the wall to sit next to him on the floor, Sirius following after. For a moment they stay like that, next to one another but not touching, not speaking, until eventually Sirius sighs, his body sagging against Remus’s, his head resting on his shoulder.

“I’m still mad at you,” he says quietly.

Remus’s heart squeezes as his arm reaches around Sirius’s back and pulls him closer.

“I know.”

“I’m sorry.”

Remus almost laughs at that. “It’s okay. As long as you still want me here.”

Sirius sighs, turning his head and burying his face in the crook of Remus’s neck. “I want you here,” he says into his skin. Remus squeezing him a little tighter.

“Part of me,” Sirius goes on after brief a pause, words so quiet that Remus can barely hear them even with Sirius’s mouth so close to his ear. “Hates it because it’s like Reg is rubbing it in my face that I wasn’t enough.”

Remus blinks, surprised by this sudden turn in the conversation. “What do you mean?”

Sirius lets out a hot breath against his neck. “Those last few years, when we were in that house together...there were moments when it felt like I could have died and he wouldn’t have cared. And if he’s just a heartless bastard then it’s not personal you know? But if he isn’t...if he’s capable of loving someone...”

And suddenly Remus understands. “Then why couldn’t he love you?”

There’s a moment of silence before Sirius speaks again. “I know that James is better than me.”

“Sirius—“

But Sirius cuts him off, clearly not in the mood to be placated.

“But then there’s this other—this other part of it. Because if he—if he loves James, I mean actually, properly loves him, then that means he can’t really be one of them can he? Not completely. There has to be at least some part of him that wants something else. Something different.”

“Maybe, yeah,” Remus says, not entirely sure.

“But I didn’t know—I didn’t think that part of him still existed. Because if it does then—“ Sirius’s voice cracks and Remus can physically feel him getting frustrated with himself. “That’s the difference.”

Remus’s brow furrows even though Sirius can’t see it. “The difference?”

Sirius sighs. “Between him choosing to stay,” he says weakly, pain thrumming through his words. “And me leaving him behind.”

Chapter End Notes

Hello beautiful people!

I think this chapter was a little shorter but hey, Regulus is back! So, that's fun. Also I feel like Peter was a real MVP in this chapter which, honestly, is a surprise to us all and unlikely to happen again. But I guess even rats have good days.

Thank you for all your kudos and comments and I've seen some like tiktoks and fan videos too which honestly is just so cool to me so like wow love you guys :) :)

Chapter 36

Chapter Summary

Is anyone okay? No. Will they be eventually? Also no.

Chapter Notes

Tw: deals with trauma surrounding death and murder

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

PART I JAMES

Regulus is just staring at him, eyes wide, something complicated twisting up his face that James can't quite interpret.

"Reg?" he asks cautiously.

But Regulus doesn't respond, at least not right away, his body rigid at James's side. Eventually he manages to force his expression into something vaguely blank, which James knows is a bad sign.

"Sirius knows about us," he repeats robotically. "Does he know because you told him?" there is something brittle about his voice.

James wants to say no, that he would never betray Regulus's trust like that, but he's not about to throw Remus under the bus.

"You were missing," is what he says instead. Which Regulus seems to take as an admission of guilt.

"Fuck James," he hisses, before he grips his knees, head dropping down between them. "Fuck. Fuck. Fuck."

"Hey, it's okay," James says, even though he has absolutely no idea if that's true.

"I can't deal with this right now, I don't even—Fuck—I can't."

"Reg—"

“He’ll never forgive me for this,” and then he laughs, head still between his knees, breaths coming in and out in wheezing gasps. “No, that’s stupid. He was never going to forgive me anyway. But now he’ll hate me. Properly hate me—“

“Regulus,” James says again, trying and failing to stop his spiralling.

“I don’t want to fight with him. I don’t want to hurt him. I’m so tired of hurting people.”

Who have you hurt? James almost asks before he stops himself. “Regulus you have to breathe okay?” James’s hand goes to the back of Regulus’s neck, squeezing just enough that he can feel it. “No one is fighting anyone,” though he isn’t sure he can promise that, not knowing Sirius as well as he does.

“What if he never speaks to you again?” Regulus sounds out of breath. “You’ll resent me. You’ll hate me too—“

“This isn’t your fault Reg, I knew what the consequences were,” though he can’t help the panic that rises up in him at the thought of Sirius cutting him out of his life. “I won’t hate you.”

“You will. You fucking will,” another choked laugh bubbles out of him. “But I guess that doesn’t matter either,” he’s talking to himself, James realizes. “I already made sure you would.”

James feels those words like they’re hands twisting his gut. “Regulus,” he says more sternly, squeezing his neck again, not tight enough to hurt, just enough to anchor him, to keep him grounded in his body instead of his unraveling nightmares. “Breathe. Now. Breathe with me. In and out.”

“I—“

“No, no more talking. Just breathe, okay? Open your mouth and inhale.”

After a few seconds James hears the sound of breath being slowly taken in.

“Good, that’s good. Again, do it with me.” And so they breathe together. In, two, three, out, two, three. In, two, three, out two three. Again. And again. And again. Until James feels certain that Regulus isn’t about to pass out. He leans forward, pressing his forehead to Regulus’s temple.

“You need to trust me.”

He feels Regulus sag against him. “That isn’t the problem.”

“Then what is?”

Reg doesn’t speak, and after several minutes James gives up waiting, letting out a heavy sigh. “Reg,” he says softly, “keeping things from me? Things you think I can’t handle? That’s not trust.”

Regulus presses back against him. “I don’t want you to know everything I know,” he says quietly. “I don’t even want to know everything I know. Some things you can’t take back. Can’t forget. I don’t want to do that to you,” another pause and then, “Please don’t make me do that to you.”

James squeezes his eyes shut and resists the urge to break something. To tear the world apart for everything it’s done to Reg. “I’m so sorry,” he finally manages.

“No don’t—I don’t deserve it.”

“Reg,” his voice aches but Regulus quickly pulls back, sitting up and rubbing his face.

“We should go,” his voice has turned cold. A defence mechanism. “It’s too early to be disappearing and I’ve already missed enough lessons as it is.” He gets to his feet without looking at James.

James wants to tell him to stop. That they can stay here all day. All week. Forever. Tucked away in their little corner of the universe where James can keep him safe. But he knows a brush off when he sees one. Knows what Regulus looks like when he’s locked himself away. The boy in front of him doesn’t want to be coddled or comforted or touched. This isn’t Reg anymore. It’s the heir to the noble and most ancient house of Black. James has learned to spot the difference between them.

“Okay,” he says eventually, getting awkwardly to his feet as Regulus goes about righting his robes, returning his appearance to its normal immaculately quaffed state. You’d never guess he’d been vomiting his fear up only a few minutes ago.

“I’ll deal with Sirius okay?” James says, earning him a tight nod.

“If you think you can.” His tone is dismissive but James knows that Regulus is terrified of what his brother will do next.

“I can,” James tries to put as much confidence into those words as he can, even if it’s confidence that he doesn’t feel. But it’s hard when Reg won’t meet his eye.

They’re nearly at the door when something else starts nagging at the back of James’s mind. “Hey Reg?” he stops him with his hand on the doorknob. The younger boy looks at him over his shoulder.

“Mary said—Mary Macdonald—she said something to me, over break.”

Regulus goes unnaturally still. “Oh?” he says mildly, tone not at all matching his posture, the effect is unnerving.

“Er—yeah. I was just—just wondering,” there’s no good way to ask this but James struggles to find one anyway. “What happened,” he lands on eventually, “the night she was attacked?”

Regulus’s expression remains blank. “You know what happened.”

“Do I?”

There's a tense moment of silence during which James tries and fails to crack Regulus's mask. "I don't know what to tell you James," he says eventually. "I wasn't there."

It hits James square in the chest. The feeling of wrongness. For one blissful second he doesn't understand it—doesn't understand why his skin suddenly feels like crawling off his bones as he stares into Regulus's empty eyes. But then he realizes;

Regulus is lying.

He's lying to me.

Which means—

"Is that all?" Regulus asks, breaking into James's thoughts. "I'd rather not get detention on my first day back."

James blinks at him, mouth dry "Um—yeah. Okay. Sorry. That's all."

Regulus nods, opening the door and pausing halfway through. When he looks back for the second time there's something a little more human in his stare. More like the boy who'd just been sitting with James on the floor.

"Tonight?" is all Regulus asks.

James offers him a shaky smile. "Tonight," he agrees, watching Regulus nod before slipping out of the room. He finds he can't move, a trembling breath scratching its way out of his lungs.

"Fuck," he presses the heels of his hands into his eyes. "Oh fuck Reg. What did you do?"

PART II REGULUS

He's barely in class for thirty minutes when a silvery translucent phoenix flies through the doors and up to Professor Flitwick's desk. Regulus grits his teeth and looks back down at his parchment. It's probably nothing. He's sure Dumbledore sends messages to his teachers all the time. Granted, he's never seen it happen before but that doesn't mean—

"Mr. Black?"

Every muscles in his body tenses as he looks up to find Professor Flitwick's eyes on him.

"Professor Dumbledore would like to see you. He said to bring your books. You won't be back before the end of class."

Fuck.

Regulus nods at Flitwick before he starts inelegantly shoving his books back into his bag. He knows that it's the least of his problems right now, but he really wishes that Dumbledore

could have waited until lunch or something. He hates that he's already missed the first few weeks of the winter term. He's behind. And Regulus is never behind. He likes school, he's not embarrassed about that, even if Evan mocks him mercilessly for it. He's good at school, and, not to be too much of a Ravenclaw, but he really misses learning things.

"Shit Reg," Evan whispers beside him. "You've only been here a few hours, what the fuck did you do to get summoned to the Headmaster's office?"

Regulus only shakes his head as he slides his bag over his shoulder. "No idea," he mutters. "See you at lunch?"

"Yeah, yeah, of course. Hey, tell Dumbledore to eat a dick for me will you?" he shoots Regulus a grin that actually manages to calm his nerves a little bit.

"You're a moron Evan," he says fondly, heading out of the class and into the largely deserted corridor.

Regulus assumes the password to Dumbledore's office is the same as it was before Christmas and he's proven right when the ugly stone gargoyle guarding it shifts to reveal the stairs. With every step he takes he can feel his pulse speeding up, his palms and underarms growing sweaty. It's stupid, to be afraid of this after having just spent two weeks in Azkaban, but at least there he'd known what to expect. Well, sort of. Here though? Here he doesn't know what Dumbledore is capable of. What he can do to Regulus. He just knows that Dumbledore's the only one whose power is equal to Voldemort's—magically and politically. And he also knows that Dumbledore doesn't like him.

"Come in," the Headmasters's voice calls out after Regulus knocks tentatively on the large doors at the top of the stairs.

The cluttered nature of Dumbledore's office automatically puts Regulus on edge every time he steps into it. Not only because he likes things ordered, but because it makes it difficult to get his bearings. He doesn't know if there is another door, he thinks there must be, connecting to the Headmasters's private rooms, but he can't see it. Doesn't know if it's the only one or if there are more. He's not even certain that they're alone. Someone could easily be hiding amongst the trinkets and oddities that Dumbledore has piled around himself like he's a dragon collecting treasure.

"Sit," the old man says, gesturing to the single chair in front of him, he smiles at Regulus but the expression doesn't reach his eyes. In Regulus's experience it never does. Dumbledore is already sitting behind his desk, half-moon spectacles at the tip of his nose, hands laced in front of him.

Regulus does not relax when he sits down, back straight, barely touching the wood. "You wanted to see me?" he asks, when Dumbledore allows the silence to drag on.

Dumbledore tilts his head forward, still smiling. "I did." Another painful silence stretches between them and it takes every ounce of self control Regulus has not to fidget, not to let his gaze drop.

Regulus isn't at his best. That's the truth. Two weeks in Azkaban, a week at Grimmauld before that, his nerves are too close to the skin. His body and mind and heart too sensitive. He was barely able to keep it together with James this morning. Well, if you consider vomiting keeping it together. He hopes none of that shows on his face but he has a sneaking suspicion that Dumbledore already knows. That that's why he wanted to speak with him so soon.

"You took an extended vacation I'm told," Dumbledore says, and Regulus nearly sighs with the relief of having the silence broken.

"Family emergency," he says calmly.

Dumbledore arches his brow. "Oh?"

"Yup."

Dumbledore tilts his head to the side, assessing Regulus. "Your teachers tell me you're quite bright," he says, the sudden shift in the conversation startling Regulus.

"Er—do they?" he hates the uncertainty that he's allowed to slip into his voice.

"They do. And I've been struggling to understand why someone so intelligent would willingly waste his talents on the bigoted crusades of a mad man."

Regulus blinks, opening and closing his mouth, not sure how to respond. No one ever speaks to him about this—about Voldemort—so bluntly and Regulus isn't sure what he should deny and what he should own up to. Is he meant to feign ignorance in this situation? Does Dumbledore actually know anything or is he just making guesses?

"I'm sorry Professor," Regulus says when he finally manages to find his voice again. "But I'm not quite sure what you mean?"

"Ah, of course, I'm sorry, I've been told I can be rather obtuse sometimes," he laughs, the noise causing the hair to stand up on the back of Regulus's neck. "Let me be more clear."

He slides something across his desk and it takes Regulus a minute to focus on it, to cut through the buzzing anxiety fogging up his brain and properly read the words in front of him. It's today's edition of the Daily Profit, he realizes. The front page of the Daily Prophet to be precise. When he finally reads the headline he feels his whole body recoil before he can get control of himself. He tries to clamp down on the fear that swells inside him, that he knows is playing across his face right now, but he doesn't quite manage it.

"Prisoner Murdered in His Cell," Dumbledore reads the headline out loud. "Ministry in Uproar."

All Regulus can do is stare back at him with wide eyes. Dumbledore apparently takes that as permission to continue.

"Jonathan Van Wheeler was murdered late last night in his cell in Azkaban. The twenty-two year old was being held on suspicions of Death Eater activity. Aurors refuse to comment on

whether or not his death confirms or refutes his connection to the terrorist group.”

A little bit of doubt, Regulus thinks numbly. It’s what Voldemort had wanted and it’s exactly what he got.

“Van Wheeler’s family vehemently denies that the young man had any such associations, his father saying, in a statement made early this morning; “What has happened to my son is a great injustice. The Aurors had no right taking him. They just wanted somebody. Wanted to feel like they were doing something. So they took my boy. My beautiful boy. I blame the Ministry more than anyone else for his death. He never should have been in Azkaban.”

“Stop,” Regulus says, voice raw. This couldn’t have worked out better for Voldemort. Not only are the Aurors still unclear about whether or not they’ve been following a false lead, but now public opinion is turning against them.

“I’m sorry,” Dumbledore says mildly, looking up from the paper. “What was that family emergency again? I’m afraid I forgot to ask?”

Regulus is pretty sure if he tried to speak right now he would choke. All he can manage is holding Dumbledore’s stare and not throwing up. He hadn’t known the man’s name before. Jonathan. He can conjure up his face so easily— pale and desperate and begging for mercy.

“It isn’t mentioned in this article, because the Ministry doesn’t want anyone to know, but along with a murder, it appears there was also an escape last night. A relative of yours I believe, Rabastan Lestrage. Perhaps that is the emergency to which you were referring?”

Still Regulus doesn’t speak. Can’t. His brain is a mess of half-formed thoughts and memories he is desperately trying to force back down into the corner of himself where he keeps everything else he can’t think about.

“I’ll not pretend that I don’t find your actions reprehensible,” Dumbledore goes on, apparently bored with waiting for a response. “But it would be of great value to me to have a set of eyes in Tom’s inner circle. Especially one in a family like yours. So I will ask you again, work with me, and maybe you’ll be able to wash some of this blood from your hands.” He gives Regulus a look that is more like disgust than pity. “You don’t strike me as someone who has the stomach for murder.”

Regulus almost laughs. Considering the amount of throwing up he’s been doing that might literally be true. Then something else occurs to him. Something equally hard to stomach.

“Is that why you left us there—left Sirius?” he’s proud that his voice comes out at least relatively even.

Dumbledore doesn’t flinch. “Left you where?”

It’s an irritating question, but Regulus answers anyway. “At Grimmauld. I bet the second James Potter brought Sirius home his parents were begging you to let them take him. But you never did. Never did anything even though you must have known—“

“Known what?” Dumbledore interrupts, voice betraying nothing but casual interest.

Everything in Regulus begs him to shut his mouth. These are all the things they don’t say. All the things they never say. Hide the bruises. Smile and stand up straight. Dress smart. No one will notice. No one will know. We are the Noble and most Ancient House of Black. We do not cry. We do not whine. We certainly don’t ask for help.

“What they were like,” he half-whispers, not sure he can manage more honesty than that. “What was happening to us in that house. You never lifted a finger until the day Sirius left himself. Was that because of this,” Regulus gestures to him. “Because you wanted—what did you say again? Eyes?”

Considering how blunt he’s been throughout this encounter, Regulus really shouldn’t be surprised by the words that come out of his mouth next. But somehow he still is.

“Yes,” Dumbledore says, without shame. Regulus finds himself well and truly speechless. “It was necessary. Ideally Sirius would have remained there until he graduated but oh well. Best laid plans and so forth. Luckily,” he runs Regulus over with his eyes, “there’s still you.”

And oh.

Oh isn’t that just.

Just exactly what his fucking mother thought.

Regulus takes a deep breath and tries to assess the situation in front of him, tries not to lose control, to hold himself together long enough to get out of this fucking office.

“The last time we spoke you wanted my wand,” he says slowly, ensuring his words come out strong. Stable. Freed of the fear and anger strangling him under the surface. “I’m assuming you weren’t able to get a warrant from the Ministry to do so?” he needs to make sure he knows where he stands. Knows what cards Dumbledore is playing with.

Dumbledore pauses, blue ice like ice staring into him. “I was not.”

Regulus nods. So he tried and he failed. That’s good, it means their hold on the Ministry is strong, it means that legally Dumbledore has no power here.

“That’s why you brought this then,” Regulus points at the paper. “You needed new blackmail material?”

Dumbledore arches his brow. “And what on Earth would Jonathan Van Wheeler’s death have to do with you?”

“Nothing...of course,” Regulus says sharply, holding Dumbledore’s stare. “It has nothing to do with me. So we’re done here?”

He really wishes he could look away but he doesn’t want to seem weak—at least, not weaker than he already does.

“This is the last time I will be making you this offer Regulus,” he says in that deep all-consuming voice of his. “I will never again offer you an olive branch. There will be no changing your mind from this moment on.”

Regulus nods, the motion jerky because he’s shaking so badly. “I understand.”

“Do you?”

Regulus doesn’t dignify that with an answer. He wants out, of course he wants out, but he doesn’t trust Dumbledore. And at least his mother needs to keep him alive.

Eventually Dumbledore sighs. “Then yes. We’re done.”

Regulus gets up from his chair but doesn’t quite make it out of the room. He knows that Dumbledore doesn’t care, that Regulus is nothing but a piece on the board to him, which seems to be all he is to everyone these days. But for some reason he still says it.

“I could have used you when I was eleven,” he looks back over his shoulder. “You could have made a difference then.”

Dumbledore holds his gaze, stare unblinking. “The world doesn’t owe you anything Regulus,” his voice hits Regulus somewhere low in his stomach. “And I certainly don’t.” Despite his best efforts Regulus feels the burning sensation of shame wash over him.

Without wasting anymore time he pushes through the door and sprints down the stairs.

He doesn’t know where he’s going. It’s not quite lunch yet but he can’t stomach the thought of walking back into class. He can’t stomach the idea of being anywhere if he’s honest. He just wants to disappear. To scrub the skin off his bones. He hates the way his body feels, hates the things it’s done, hates the sound of his own thoughts in his head.

Breathe, he tells himself as he walks belligerently through the corridors. No purpose, no direction, just the desire to move and not think. The word is said in James’s voice. The ghost of his touch burning into the back of Regulus’s neck.

Breathe, breathe, breath—

“Well look who’s back.”

Regulus whips around, wand drawn as he comes face to face with a smirking Mary Macdonald. She doesn’t even flinch, just arches her brow as Regulus feels his heart start to beat again.

“Jumpy much?” she asks.

Regulus doesn’t lower his wand right away, which is stupid. They’re in the middle of the corridor, and the last thing he wants is to give Dumbledore anymore excuses to call him into his office.

“You gonna hex me Black?” she steps forward until tip of his wand is pressing into the base of her throat. “Or, sorry, I mean again. Gonna hex me again?”

Regulus’s hands are shaking and he can’t help thinking of the last time he had his wand pointed at someone.

I’m a good man, Jonathan had begged.

I swear.

I’m going to get married.

Please.

He drops his arm but doesn’t put away his wand, keeping it firmly clutched in the palm of his hand. “Not now,” he bites out. “I can’t—I can’t do this right now.”

“Unfortunately I really don’t care,” she says, sounding like she means every word. “We had a deal you and I.”

Regulus wants to scream.

“I gave you two weeks.”

“I was unavoidably detained,” he says flatly.

“Well, you’re here now, and you’re meant to be selling out your friends to me.”

Regulus had actually forgotten about that. So much has happened since their meeting on the Quidditch pitch. This mess with Mary had felt so big and important then, but now? Regulus can barely bring himself to care. Too busy trying to navigate his way around the two titans currently vying for his loyalty.

“I haven’t even been back a day,” he finally says, sounding nearly as exhausted as he feels.

“Yes, well, I’ve been here for weeks, so you’ll excuse me if I’m not feeling particularly patient.”

Regulus grits his teeth. “I’ll give you your information—though, I’m not entirely sure you’ve been holding up your end of the bargain.”

She arches her brow, looking amused more than anything else, which Regulus finds infuriating but he pushes his anger down. It won’t do him any favours to act out right now.

“Is that so?” she asks mildly.

“James has been asking questions, said you told him stuff over the break. You know anything about that?”

Regulus had been certain his heart was going to drown in the pit of his stomach this morning when James asked him about Mary's attack.

The Gryffindor smirks. "James isn't exactly known for minding his own business is he?"

"So you're saying he, what? Figured it out on his own?"

Mary shrugs. "I'm saying I gave you two weeks. But I still haven't breathed a word to Dumbledore. It was his office you just came from yeah? I could always go have a chat with him."

Regulus's hand squeezes his wand. "I told you I would keep you informed and I will."

Mary smiles with all her teeth. "Good. Then we shouldn't have any problems should we?"

Regulus doesn't bother responding to that. Doesn't see the point. "I'm going to lunch now, that alright with you?"

She laughs, leaning back against the wall and crossing her arms over her chest. "Sure babe."

Regulus has barely taken two steps before she speaks again. Words crawling down his spine.

"He still doesn't know about the Mark," she says recklessly, though Regulus supposes it isn't her life she's gambling with. "I left that one for you. But you have to tell him."

Regulus doesn't stop. Doesn't turn around.

"Yeah," he mutters under his breath, ignoring the ache in his chest. "Yeah, I know."

PART III JAMES

Remus doesn't show up until dinner. James would have had no idea where he was if it weren't for Peter. Even still, it makes him nervous. This mess isn't Remus's fault and he doesn't want him to have to bear the brunt of Sirius's anger. Or any of it for that matter.

"There," Peter nudges James's foot under the table and he immediately stops nervously tapping his cutlery and turns to watch Remus walk towards them. He looks tired but okay.

Tired and alone.

"Hey," he says softly, as he drops down into the seat beside James.

"He was there then?" Peter asks, leaning across the table.

Remus nods. "Yeah, he was there. It was a good guess Pete."

Peter preens.

James watches as Remus rubs at his eyes, hair mussed and clothes covered in dirt, all very unlike the pristine front he normally presents. There are so many things he wants to ask him that he doesn't know where to start.

"Are you okay?" he decides on eventually.

Remus gives him a weak smile. "I've been better, but I've been worse," he pauses, taking in a deep breath. "I think we'll be...okay," he says, though his words are shaky, like they aren't quite sure of their footing.

"That's good," James says, swallowing around the lump in his throat. "How—ah—how is he?"

Remus doesn't manage to hide his grimace. "He needs...time, I think."

"Can I talk to him?"

"James," he says wearily.

"Please I just—"

"James," he repeats more sternly, eyes locking with his. "Did you hear what I just said?"

James does his best to bite back the frustration that flares inside him. "He needs time," he repeats stiffly.

Remus nods his head. "Yeah. He just needs to be alone for a bit."

"Alone with you?" James isn't able to keep the bitterness out of his voice. And yeah, he knows he's out of order, but there was a time when he was the person that Sirius wanted at his side when he couldn't stand the sight of anyone else. When he was the one to comfort him. Put him back together. Save him from himself. And he's jealous. Because this—this new development between Sirius and Remus, it feels like being replaced. It feels like losing something.

"Yes," Remus replies, not unkindly, because it's Remus and he is the bigger person in nearly every situation. "Alone with me."

James doesn't know what he's supposed to say to that, but thankfully McGonagall saves him from having to figure it out.

"Mr. Lupin, I am told by your professors that you and Mr. Black were absent from class today. Care to explain yourself?"

Minnie knows how to be intimidating when she wants to be, towering over them with a stone cold stare and unsmiling mouth. Remus doesn't even flinch.

"Sorry Professor, I have a note from Madam Pomfrey," he reaches into his bag and does, in fact, pull out a note. It is work for James to keep his face neutral. "Sirius got sick this morning, I took him to the infirmary and stayed with him."

McGonagall takes the note from him and inspects it thoroughly. "I see. And you needed to remain with him because...?" she looks back up in time to get the full force of a Remus Lupin sheepish smile. It's truly a thing of beauty. All soft and self deprecating. The guy could get away with murder using that thing.

"I don't know if you've noticed, but Sirius is a bit of a handful on a good day, let alone when he's ill."

James actually thinks he sees McGonagall trying to bite back her own smile. Everyone thinks Remus is the goody-goody, but he's a duplicitous little bastard when he wants to be.

"Very well, give Mr. Black my regards, and Poppy as well, she'll need them after a day with you two."

"I will professor, of course," he flashes her another one of those smiles as she walks away, note in hand.

When Remus turns back to the table he slumps, like that performance took it out of him.

"Holy shit," Peter gasps, echoing James's thoughts exactly. "Remus did you just forge a sick note? You?"

Remus looks up at him, frowning. "It's not forged," and when the pair of them continue to stare at him unconvinced he sighs, rubbing his forehead. "Well, not completely. She gave me a few, in case I needed to...take time off, around the full moon. I just...adjusted it a bit."

"To include Sirius?" James asks.

Remus nods wearily. "To include Sirius."

James laughs, shaking his head. "That's brilliant that is." But Remus continues to look unhappy about it.

"She gave them to me because she trusts me, this isn't something to be congratulating me on."

"I dunno," Peter says thoughtfully. "Pretty impressive if you ask me."

"Very quick witted," James agrees.

Remus only rolls his eyes. "You two are a terrible influence."

"Hey!" James holds his hands up in a show of innocence. "You're the one forging legal documents here."

"A sick note is not a legal document," Remus hisses as he starts piling food onto his plate. "And would you keep your voice down?"

"We just didn't know you were such a delinquent," James teases.

“It’s the Prefect thing,” Peter adds. “Really threw us off.”

“I’m ignoring you both now,” Remus says, causing Peter and James to snicker.

It takes a few minutes before James realizes that Remus isn’t just putting food on his plate, but on the napkin next to him as well. James looks blatantly at it, brow raised. At first he thinks Remus doesn’t see, but eventually he sighs.

“It’s for Sirius.”

“Ah,” James tries to ignore the pulling in his gut. “Not coming in then.”

“No.”

“And you’re going back?”

Remus doesn’t meet his eye. “Staying the night.”

“Ah,” James says for the second time, not sure he can manage much else.

“Blimey that’s going to be bloody uncomfortable,” Peter shivers across the table and Remus gives him a small smile.

“I’ve done it before.”

“Suppose so,” though Peter doesn’t sound convinced.

James can feel Remus shooting him glances as they keep eating, the silence between them now a little awkward. But he does his best to ignore it, to focus on the food on his plate. His mashed potatoes are absolutely fascinating tonight.

“Listen, James,” Remus says eventually, voice dropped low “We should—we need to talk.”

James looks over at him. If they’d been dating this would be the moment when James would start worrying Remus was about to break up with him, but since they’re not, he isn’t exactly sure what “we need to talk” means.

“Okay?” he says eventually, instead of the obvious: we’re talking right now?

“I have something to tell you—that you should know. Maybe before I—“ But Remus quickly cuts himself off as Marlene and Dorcas get too close.

“Hey boys,” Marlene says cheerily, dropping into the seat next to Peter, Dorcas on her other side. “What’s shaking?”

It’s a weird moment, remembering suddenly how normal this day has been for everyone else, like being woken up from a dream. Reminded that the rest of the world still exists.

“Er—guys?” Marlene starts to look concerned when none of them reply, apparently all experiencing the same strange feeling as James. It’s like he can’t remember how to hold a

regular conversation because his entire life at the moment is a disaster.

“Nothing much,” Peter quickly jumps in. “Except—oi, did you hear about Zabini and Richardson?”

“Oh my God yeah, what the hell?” Dorcas laughs. “Weirdest couple ever.”

“Are they a couple though?” Marlene says frowning. “I thought they just hooked up?”

“Fair,” Dorcas concedes. “Hard to tell where the line is, between hook-up and relationship,” she sends Marlene a significant look that the Gryffindor either doesn’t see or willfully ignores.

“Apparently they basically put on a porno in the middle of the Slytherin common room.”

“Jesus Peter,” Remus says, exasperated.

“What?” Peter demands. “I’m just saying what I heard.”

“To be fair,” Dorcas interjects. “I also heard that.”

“Me too!” Marlene agrees.

“Wait, what?” James has finally managed to regain control of his thoughts. “I didn’t hear any of this, what the hell are you guys talking about?”

“Merlin James, it’s been all anyone has been able to talk about all day. Where have you been?” Marlene demands.

James opens his mouth but finds he doesn’t actually know what to say. He’s been here, technically, he just hasn’t...his eyes go to the Slytherin table.

“Maybe he’s just not interested in salacious gossip about his peers?” Remus intercepts, saving him. James sends Remus a quick look of thanks.

Marlene rolls her eyes at the same time that Peter says; “Since when?”

“I’ve been a bit out of it today,” James finally manages. “Go on, tell me the gossip.”

Marlene immediately launches into the story, complete with over the top hand gestures and a very bad impression of Richardson’s Irish accent that has Dorcas barely keeping it together. James listens and laughs in the right places, but he finds it difficult to be present. To care.

“You saving those for later?”

James blinks. Peter and Marlene are arguing over the details of the story—Peter adamant that Richardson got fully naked in the common room and Marlene insisting that she heard he only got down to his pants. But Dorcas, James realizes, is looking at the small pile of food on Remus’s napkin. Remus blushes but his expression remains neutral.

“I get a little peckish after dinner sometimes,” he says.

“A little peckish?” which is fair considering the size of the pile.

“Don’t you guys have like, secret access to the kitchens?” Marlene pulls herself away from her argument with Peter who is looking thoroughly dejected at this point. “Aren’t the House Elves completely in love with you?”

“Can you blame them?” James shoots her a grin, feeling a bit like he’s on autopilot. Marlene sticks out her tongue at him.

“I don’t like to make them do extra work,” Remus mumbles, looking down at his plate.

Marlene’s face softens an almost comical amount. “Oh wow, that’s adorable.”

Remus’s ears turn bright red.

“That’s our Moony,” James reaches forward and pinches Remus’s cheek. “Adorable.” He gets a sharp jab in the side from Remus’s elbow, forcing the air out of him like he’d just been punctured. “Adorable and sharp,” James corrects, causing the others to laugh, even Remus, a little.

It’s at that moment that James sees Mary walking towards them and his stomach drops. He needs to talk to her, he knows he does, needs to ask her to explain everything she said on New Years. Needs to be sober when she does it. But watching her approach he realizes that he vehemently doesn’t want to. That he’s actually afraid of what she might say. Of what he might hear if he lets himself listen.

“Sorry, just remembered I forgot something in class,” James stands abruptly, not really looking at anyone, though he can feel Remus’s concerned gaze on him. “I’ll catch you guys back in the common room yeah?”

Dorcas and Marlene both wave goodbye, Marlene already distracted by Mary’s approach.

“James—” Remus tries as James starts making his way between tables.

“It’s fine Moons,” he says, feeling itchy and nervous and suddenly claustrophobic. “I’ll see you...” his eyes go to the extra pile of food, “tomorrow I guess.”

“Tomorrow,” Remus agrees, though it doesn’t sound like he likes it.

James doesn’t pause much longer. He needs to get out of there, needs some fresh air. The second before he exits the hall into the corridor his eyes go back to the Slytherin table, but Regulus isn’t there. James grimaces, pushing through the doors and trying to ignore the way Regulus’s absence makes his stomach twist.

He doesn’t want to be the kind of boyfriend that has to know where Regulus is all the time. It feels...controlling. Not something James has ever considered himself to be. But he can’t help the automatic panic that runs through him when he can’t check on Reg. Being the newly appointed heir to the House of Black is a precarious position these days, and Regulus doesn’t

care enough to protect himself. Doesn't think he's worth the effort. The very thought makes James's chest ache.

It takes a few minutes before he's able to make it to one of the school's courtyards, practically gasping as he steps outside. It's cold, but James doesn't mind, welcomes it in fact. The biting at his skin helps keep the panic at bay. He needs to get it together, the sight of Mary Macdonald can't send him into a fucking anxiety spiral.

You have to talk to her. That's how you fix this.

says the annoyingly reasonable voice in his head.

And yes, okay, it's right. But he just got Regulus back. Can't they have a little more time before he goes prying into things? Looking for answers he doesn't want?

But what if—

the voice demands.

What if he was there? What if he helped them hurt her? What if he hurt her himself?

James shakes his head.

Regulus would never do that.

He just wouldn't.

“Hey?”

James whips around to find Lily Evans perched in the alcove behind him. She has a book open on her lap but no coat or gloves. Like she's impervious to the cold.

“Hi?” he says dumbly, standing in the centre of the courtyard staring at her. It's magic hour, the sun low, everything glowing gold and pink. It makes Lily look like she could be part of the castle—painted or carved—a work of art.

He shakes his head. “Sorry—er—I didn't realize anyone was out here.”

She nods, smiling a bit. “Yeah, I got that.”

James's head is still a bit of a mess so it's a struggle for him to drag together a thought coherent enough to say out loud. “What're you doing?” turns out to be the best he can manage.

Lily's smile grows as she gestures to the book in her lap. “Homework. What are you doing?”

“Breathing,” the answer comes to him so quickly he doesn't have a chance to realize how absolutely mad it is until he's hearing it out loud. Lily arches her brow but rather than try to explain himself James just pushes forward. “Aren't you cold?”

Lily shakes her head before picking up the wand sitting next to her. “Warming charm.”

“Ah,” James says, “well, in that case,” he shoves his hands into his pockets before stepping forward. He feels it instantly, the minute he’s inside her magic, a warm tingling feeling rushing through him and something citrusy in his nose and mouth.

“That’s better,” he says unprompted.

Lily bites her lower lip. “I’m glad.”

There’s a moment of silence during which James feels her watching him but can’t quite bring himself to meet her gaze, looking instead at the school grounds, watching the sun’s quick retreat towards the horizon.

“You can sit you know?” Lily says eventually.

“What?”

She nods to the spot across from her. “You can sit.”

“Oh,” and then; “Right, okay, thanks.”

It’s a pit of a squeeze, his feet bracketing her’s as they sit across from one another. James can’t help but feel that she’s still watching him. Not just looking—but searching. Seeing.

“You okay?” she asks eventually.

James lets out a big breath, blowing the hair off his forehead. “I—“ but for some reason the rest of the sentence doesn’t make it out, leaving his mouth hanging open in awkward silence.

A look of concern flickers across Lily’s face. “James?” she asks softly, reaching out to squeeze his knee.

He swallows, trying to start again. “Sorry,” he says, voice a little tight as he passes a hand over his face. “It’s been a bit of a day.”

Lily nods like she understands though James isn’t sure how she could. Despite that it doesn’t feel insincere. Nothing Lily Evans does ever feels insincere and maybe that’s why James finds himself saying more than he means to.

“I think someone is lying to me,” he nearly chokes on the words. “Or—someone tried to tell me that they were lying, but I wasn’t ready to hear it.” He’s floundering, with too many feelings and thoughts and fears. But Lily doesn’t waver.

“Are you ready to hear it now?” she asks, without judgement.

James lets out an empty laugh. “No.” and then; “But I think I need to anyway.”

Lily nods her head. “Then I’m sure you will.”

“Really? Cause I’m not. That’s why I’m here, just the thought of it had me running scared,” his cheeks heat with embarrassment. He’s not usually the type of person to run away from things.

“Sometimes you need to make a few false starts before you can jump into the deep end. But you’ve already made it to the edge, I don’t doubt you’ll take the last step eventually.”

James meets her eyes, bright green and shockingly warm. “Why?”

Lily shrugs, the smile back in the corner of her mouth. “You’re the bravest person I know, also the stupidest mind you, but, I imagine there’s a lot of cross over between those traits.”

James can’t help it, he laughs, the sound a little overloud in the empty courtyard, but it feels good, loosens some of the tension in his chest. It’s then, just as he’s beginning to feel better, that he notices the tightness in Lily’s face. Subtle, but there.

“Hey, why are you really here?” he asks, tapping her heel with the toe of his foot.

“Told you, homework.”

James arches his brow. “Studying outside, in the middle of January, during supper?”

“Yeah well...” she trails off, clearly not able to come up with an excuse.

“Wow,” James says dryly. “Very convincing that.”

She scowls at him, though he doesn’t think it’s quite genuine. “I just—I just needed to be by myself.”

“Why?” James knows he’s prying but he can’t help it.

Lily lets out a heavy sigh, pinching the bridge of her nose. “It’s stupid.”

“Excellent,” James rubs his hands together. “As you just pointed out I’m an expert in stupid. Let’s hear it.”

That manages to eek a smile out of her, though only until she starts talking again. “It’s my mum...I’m...I don’t know...I’m worried something’s wrong.”

“Wrong?” James asks. “Like what kind of wrong?”

Lily shakes her head. “I don’t know, it’s just—something about her letters. They feel the way they did right before my dad died. Like she’s hiding something from me.” She shakes her head. “Sorry, I realize that sounds mad.”

“Hey, no, it doesn’t,” James says quickly. “Considering what happened with your dad I think it’s reasonable that you would be extra sensitive to this sort of stuff,” he pauses, chewing thoughtfully on his lower lip. “Would it help to see her? To talk face to face? I’m sure if you told McGonagall she’d let you use her fireplace.”

She smiles sadly at him. “It’s a bit more complicated than that.”

James scrunches his nose. “What do you mean?”

“Well,” she sighs, “my mum isn’t a witch so she doesn’t have access to the Floo Network. In order to get access you have to get permission from the Ministry and then they have to set it up for her. Last time—when my dad died—I think Dumbledore talked to them, but like, it’s not as though I can ask him to do that just because I’m feeling nervous.”

James looks at her thoughtfully. He’d never considered how difficult it must be for Muggle borns to get in contact with their parents. “I’ll talk to my mum,” he says eventually, causing Lily to arch her brow.

“You’ll talk to your mum?”

James shrugs. “She knows people at the Ministry and she’s also the only person I’ve ever seen tell Dumbledore what to do. If I tell her you want to talk to your mum she’ll make it happen.”

Lily’s eyes go wide. “I—no that’s—I’m probably just being silly.”

“I don’t think so,” James counters, “what’s silly is that the Ministry doesn’t immediately set up all Muggle-born families with a connection to the Floo Network,” when Lily continues to gape at him clearly at a loss for words, he goes on, tapping her foot again. “You should be able to talk to your mum Lily, Merlin knows I’d go barmy if I thought I couldn’t talk to mine when I needed to.”

She lets out a bemused laugh. “Thank you James that’s really…” she trails off like she can’t find the words. “Just thank you.”

“Of course,” he tries to ignore the fuzzy feeling in the pit of his stomach, but Lily presses on before he can think too much about it.

“You and your mum are close huh?”

James nods. “Honestly, she was my best friend before I met Sirius,” he realizes as he says it that he doesn’t know if it’s still true—if Sirius is still his best friend. If he’ll ever be again.

Lily laughs. “James Potter, trouble-maker and momma’s boy.”

Despite the tightness in his chest he manages a grin. “You can mock me all you want but I’m never gonna be embarrassed of my mum. She’s like, the most bad ass person I’ve ever met. You’d like her.”

Something softens in Lily’s eyes. “I’m sure I would.”

James goes on unprompted. “She’d like you too.” It makes his stomach flip, saying that out loud, remembering all the times he’d fantasized about introducing Lily to his parents. Introducing her as his girlfriend. It was bit pathetic maybe, but he hadn’t been able to help himself.

There's silence but it isn't awkward. The sun has all but set now, the sky a dark navy blue, the stars only barely visible as light flakes of snow start to fall. They catch in the moonlight and both James and Lily watch them. Entranced.

"I've always thought snow looked like magic," Lily says eventually, before laughing. "I can't explain that so don't ask me to."

But James just nods. "No, you're right, it totally does."

The flakes sparkle and glint as they land on the ground, instantly melting. Watching it James feels himself relax for the first time.

"Hey," he says, breaking the silence again, "would you mind if I...just stayed here for a bit? This is sort of the most okay I've felt all day."

When he looks back at Lily finds an expression on her face that he can't read.

"Sure," she says softly, and then, clearing her throat. "Er—as long as you don't mind me reading."

James smiles. "I don't mind."

"Okay then."

"Okay."

Their feet press against one another, neither of them acknowledging it as Lily drops her eyes back to the book in her lap and James watches the snow.

By the time James makes it up to the Gryffindor common room everyone is back from dinner. He does a quick scan of the room before sidling up to Peter who appears to be in the middle of a breakdown. Aka doing Potions coursework.

"Hey," James says, causing Peter to look up from the parchment in front of him, black ink smeared across his chin.

"Hi—you okay?"

James arches his brow before nodding towards the parchment. "I'm fine. Are you okay?"

Peter lets out pitiful noise. "No, I'm completely fucked. This is due tomorrow and I have absolutely no idea what I'm doing. Usually Moons helps me but..."

"He already take off back to the shack?"

Peter nods miserably. James claps him on the shoulder but before he can respond someone across the room catches his attention.

“Listen, Wormtail, I’ll help you okay?”

Peter looks like might actually cry. “Really?” he asks hopefully.

James very nearly laughs. “Yeah, really, I just need to talk to someone first but then I’ll be back.”

“You’re my hero.”

Now James does laugh, giving his shoulder a squeeze before he pulls away. The moment he starts walking his nerves return. Everything in him says turn around. Says not now. Not yet. But he manages to keep going, manages to make it all the way across the room.

“James?” Mary asks, looking up at him when he stops in front of her.

James shoves his hands in his pockets in an attempt to stop them from shaking. “Yeah, hey. Um—I was wondering if I could talk to you for a second?”

Mary has clever eyes, the kind that pick you to pieces between every blink. “Yeah alright,” she says eventually, getting up and sending Marlene a look that James does not remotely understand.

“My room okay?” he asks, because it’s the only place close by where he knows they’ll be alone.

Mary snorts. “The rumours tomorrow morning are going to be glorious.”

With the way a pack of first years are eyeing them on their way upstairs James knows that she’s right. He rolls his eyes. Why can’t people just mind their own damn business?

“So,” Mary says, dropping down onto Sirius’s bed while James closes the door behind them, “what’s up?”

James doesn’t know how to answer that question, suddenly feeling vaguely sick. He starts pacing. Having this conversation feels like a betrayal. Even thinking that Regulus could have anything to do with Mary’s attack feels like a betrayal. Like James is no better than everyone else, everyone who only sees Regulus’s name and family and not who he is. Who James knows that he is.

“Potter!” Mary snaps, bringing his attention back to her. “Would you stop? You’re making me sea sick.”

“Sorry,” James says, stumbling to a stop and wiping his sweaty palms off on his jeans. After a moment’s pause he walks over and sits on the bed across from her, letting out a deep sigh. Even then it takes a few more minutes before he’s able to speak.

He lifts his eyes to meet Mary’s, sharp as always. “I need you to tell me again, what you told me on New Year’s Eve. I need you to explain it to me. All of it. Everything that happened and what the hell Regulus has to do with it.”

Mary's face betrays her shock, which is a first. James doesn't think he's ever shocked Mary before. "Oh?"

He nods, hands gripping his knees, nails digging in so deep they find skin. "I wasn't ready to listen before, but I'm ready now." Which James thinks is not exactly true but he doesn't take it back.

After a moment Mary nods. "Well okay then," she says simply. "Let's start from the beginning."

Chapter End Notes

Hey! Hi! Hello!

I feel like this is a lot of picking up where we left off before Christmas, so hopefully it wasn't too dry. Also surprise I'm making y'all wait for that Sirius James altercation that is 100% coming.

Thanks for all the comments and kudos, love hearing your theories about what's going to happen (though it's very hard for me not to just jump in and be like "I know" "I have the answers")

Hope you're all having a great day/night/morning!

Chapter 37

Chapter Summary

Tale as old as time (surprise, this fic is now a musical)

Chapter Notes

tw: death / murder (not graphically described, happens off screen, no main characters)

tw: discussions of rape / sexual assault

tw: like the briefest possible mention of Christianity

(I think that's it but if I'm forgetting anything let me know - this goes for always, if there is something you think should be tw that I miss pls let me know!)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

HOGWARTS YEAR 1013

PART I: SALAZAR

There is a room in the castle that reveals itself only when it is needed most. It cannot be seen on any map or located by any spell. Once inside its occupants are kept safe, the room cares for them, providing them with everything they require—to be comfortable, to be satisfied, to be happy. The idea had been Salazar's, the others indulging him. Indulging his paranoia. Having a safe place to hide is very important to Salazar. It is, in fact, the reason that he is alive.

When he was six his mother woke him once in the middle of the night. There had been lots of yelling and people running about. Their whole family lived in one small cottage in the countryside. His brothers and cousins and uncles all worked the fields, while the women washed and sowed and cooked. The house was bursting with people and laughter and life. Salazar loved it. Loved all of them. But that night the shouting had not been drunken or joyous. It had been fearful.

“Come my darling, my sweet thing, come, come,” his mother had cooed as she carried him out of the house and across the back lawn towards the small shed they used to store tools and dry meat. She had shoved around crates and other debris before laying a blanket on the

ground in the corner and gesturing for him to lie down. Salazar had been too tired to ask questions.

“Sleep now darling,” she’d kissed the top of his head. “Everything will be alright. But you must stay here, yes? No moving, no making any noise at all, not until I come get you okay? Sal?”

“M’kay momma,” he’d slurred, already half asleep.

“Good boy.”

He was vaguely aware of her moving things back to their places in front of him. Hiding him from view.

That was the last time he saw his mother.

The last time he saw any of his family.

The Muggle town a day’s ride away had heard rumours about them. About what they were. As good Christians they could not allow such an abomination to continue. A family of witches and warlocks. Of devil worshippers.

Salazar would never know what happened exactly. Why his family hadn’t used magic against them. Or if they had, why it had failed. He’d been asleep in the shed. And when he awoke his family was dead, their home smouldering in the sunrise. The flames not quite burnt out.

Having somewhere to hide is import to Salazar.

It is especially important in a place that is made for children. Hogwarts is alive—not just a building, but a living being that thinks and feels and acts. It is the protector of every child within its walls. A surrogate mother. Who will keep her children safe when the monsters come looking for them in the middle of the night. That is why he added the room to the school’s plans, why he figured out the complicated Spell work required to make it possible. He spent months on it, so that it would be there incase of an emergency. When the students would need their mother most.

And yet, the first time the room was summoned, it was not by a frightened student in need of shelter. It was by two men, standing in a shadowy hallway, voices low and desperate, hands more so. It had given them a place to hide. To be together. To be safe—not from monsters necessarily, but from everyone else. Everyone who would never understand.

This is not the need Salazar had anticipated when he built the room. Not a need that had even occurred to him. And yet for years now, he had found himself here, standing in this room, created just for the two of them. He had stopped seeing this as a space of desperation, of last resort, and started thinking of it as home. A word he had not used since he was six years old.

He’s looking at a painting of the night sky when he hears the door open behind him. Salazar has always loved the night. The stars. They hold the future in their orbits and Salazar is

jealous. He wants nothing more than to reach out and steal their secrets.

The man who enters the room doesn't speak, his steps faltering only for a moment before he strides forward, the sound of his scabbard clanking against his hip. Without hesitation, or waiting for permission—he's never been very good at waiting for anything—he slips one arm around Salazar's waist and the other across his chest, pulling them together until there exists no space between them, until his warmth bleeds through their clothes and starts to make Salazar flush.

"Godric," he says softly, as the other man starts to nuzzle at his neck, placing gentle kisses along his jaw. "Godric," he says again, trying and failing to sound more authoritative. "We need to talk."

"Not yet," Godric says into his skin, causing tremors to shoot through him. "I've done nothing but yell at you across a table all day. I just want this for a moment longer. I just want to have you. Remember what it's like when you're mine."

Salazar tilts his head back, resting it on Godric's shoulder and giving the other man more access. "I'm always yours." Which is embarrassingly and pathetically true.

Eventually Salazar turns around, because he has to, because he can't take it anymore, and then they're kissing properly. They love and fight and kiss all the same way. Godric pushes him back against the wall, Salazar runs a hand through his hair and pulls viciously. The fear and anger and betrayal they both feel sits just below the surface. Fighting with the rest of them. It's never been this bad before. This painful.

They break apart, foreheads pressed together, Godric's hands—big and rough as they are—hold Salazar's face like it's something precious. Salazar's fingers knotted in the back of his shirt. For a long time neither of them speak, frozen like that, heavy breathing.

Here,

Salazar thinks.

I want to always be here.

"Sal," Godric's voice is gruff, his thumbs brushing his cheeks, "you have to let it go."

Salazar blinks, trying to come back to himself, to clear his head of lips and tongues and gentle hands. He feels his body go rigid.

"Just so we're clear," he says coldly, "by 'it' you're referring to the murder of my entire family?"

Godric sighs, like he's the one being attacked.

"Good," Salazar clumsily pulls away, walking to the fireplace and grabbing hold of the mantle for support, he needs to have something in his hands or there's a good chance he'll punch Godric. "Just checking."

“These children are not responsible for what has happened to you.”

“No, they’ll just be responsible for it happening to someone else.”

There’s the sound of aborted steps, as though Godric was going to come to him and then thought better of it. Smart man.

“They have every right to be here,” Godric says eventually.

“They outnumber us,” Salazar hisses, hands gripping the mantle so tightly his knuckles threaten to split through his skin. “They outnumber us everywhere and now you want to let them in here too? To this space that is just for us? Where we are free of their prejudice and hatred? You want to tell them all our secrets so they can scurry off and expose us to their parents who will no doubt start showing up at every Wizard township with fucking pitchforks.”

“Sal,” he sounds sad more than anything else. “Everyone is not like that—you cannot go through life thinking all people are cruel.”

“All people ARE cruel,” except you, he doesn’t say. Because he still has some self-respect.

Godric makes a frustrated noise before he finally moves all the way across the room. He wraps Salazar in his arms again, burying his face in his neck. Sal wants to resist, wants to push back, but he’s always been weak where Godric is concerned. Weak and hungry.

“You aren’t cruel,” Godric says eventually.

Salazar lets out a dry laugh to cover up the way those words touch some softer part of him. The part that desperately wishes to be the hero of the story. “Rowena would disagree with you.” The riff between them is recent and it hurts, though Sal would never admit that to anyone.

“Rowena doesn’t know what she’s talking about. Besides, Helga likes you.”

“Helga likes everyone.”

He can feel Godric smiling against the skin of his throat. “True.”

After a moment Salazar sighs, melting further into Godric’s warmth. “We’re supposed to be safe here,” he says quietly.

“We are.”

“We cannot trust them.”

“You have to stop thinking of this as “us” and “them”, we are one. They have magic just like you and I. Muggle-Born or not, they are Wizards and Witches and they must be trained.”

“After everything the Muggles have done to us, to our people—pushing us to the fringes of society, forcing us into hiding—they do not deserve magic. They do not deserve access to our

world.”

There’s a pause that’s longer than it should be before Godric tightens his arms around him. “Me, Helga and Rowena are all agreed.”

And doesn’t that feel like a blade in the back. For the second time that night Salazar pulls away, Godric reluctant to let him go. This time though, this time Salazar doesn’t flee to the other side of the room, doesn’t turn his back, but faces his lover head on.

“You’ve decided,” he repeats, hands in shaking fists at his sides. “And my word means nothing?”

“Of course not,” Godric says wearily. “But you’ve been overruled.”

He wants to laugh.

He wants to cry.

He won’t, he never does, his father taught him better.

“Have the three of you been speaking without me?” he asks. Godric has never been much skilled at hiding his emotions, and the guilt is now plain across his face. “I see,” Salazar does not wait for a response. “You know, I did not expect loyalty from Rowena or Helga but you? After everything we have been through, after everything I have told you—“ he is embarrassed to say that his voice breaks. “I would have thought you would understand.”

“I do understand. I do,” Godric stretches out his arms but makes no move to close the gap between them. “But just because I understand your feelings does not mean I think they are right. Sal, please, I’m begging you to see reason here. These are children.”

“I know what they are,” Salazar snaps.

“Do you?” and when a dangerous silence follows those words Godric decides to push forward, because he can never see the line. Never knows when to stop. “You are punishing them for your family’s death.”

“I am keeping our community safe!”

“You are being vindictive and short sighted,” and now he’s getting angry. “You’re smarter than this.”

“Oh fuck you.”

“Love—“

“NO, stop, stop,” he jabs an accusatory finger in Godric’s direction. “You do not get to speak to me like that—to address me in such a way when you are in the middle of betraying everything that we are—everything that we have ever been to one another.”

Most people see Godric as a frightening figure, he is tall and broad and bearded, always walking around with a broadsword strapped to his back and several smaller blades hanging from the belt at his hip. But to Salazar he will always be delicate. And right now he takes satisfaction in watching him crack.

“That’s not true, you know that’s not true,” he takes a step forward and Salazar instantly pulls out his wand, hands shaking. “Sal...”

“I will leave the school if you allow this to happen. I cannot, in good conscience, stand by and watch the three of you put in jeopardy everything I hold dear. I will not stay here, do you understand?”

And Godric looks so unbearably sad that he very nearly takes it back. “I understand.” Salazar’s chest is rising and falling in violent heaves, everything in him wrung tight. “But,” Godric finally goes on. “I cannot, in good conscience, discriminate based on blood. It’s not who I am. Not the world I wish to live in.”

Now it is Salazar who is cracking.

“You would choose them over me?” he finally asks, voice tight as he stares at the person he has trusted more than anyone else in his life. “You would choose the Muggles over me?”

Godric’s eyes are so sad.

Salazar wants to gouge them out.

“I love you,” Godric says desperately. And Salazar nearly kills him. “You know—“

“Get out,” he growls, voice low and dangerous.

Godric looks at him beseechingly. “Sal—“

“GET OUT!” he shifts his wand ever so slightly, sending a curse just over Godric’s shoulder, shattering the mirror behind him. Shock and anger flicker across Godric’s face. “Get out before I take you apart.”

He sees Godric’s hand twitch, knows that he desperately wants to reach for his own wand. Fine. Let him. Godric may have brawn on his side but his spell work has always been sloppy compared to Salazar’s. There is no way he could beat him in a duel.

But it doesn’t come to that. Instead, after a few seconds of deliberation, Godric’s arm drops lifelessly back to his side.

“Okay,” he says, still with Salazar’s wand pointed at him—right at the centre of his chest. “I’ll go. If that’s what you want.”

No.

Never.

Please.

“Yes,” he hisses, half-sure the word comes out in Parseltongue

Godric just nods, tension clear in his body as he walks past Salazar, giving him a wide berth as he heads swiftly for the door, cloak sweeping behind him.

Salazar finally lowers his wand but doesn’t allow himself to turn around and watch Godric leave. Is almost certain it would break him.

“This isn’t what I wanted,” he hears behind him. Salazar squeezes his eyes shut. “In fact, all I’ve ever really wanted is you. But I have to do what’s right Sal, I just hope you’ll realize that. I hope you’ll—” his voice breaks and Salazar doesn’t know if he’s going to finish that thought but after a few seconds he hears the sound of a throat being cleared. “I hope you’ll come back.”

And with that the door closes.

HOGWARTS 1977

PART II REGULUS

Regulus stands in the Come and Go Room, staring at a painting of the night sky. He’s never really paid much attention to it before, but up close he can appreciate the beauty of it. The velvety texture of the sky, the subtle movement of the clouds and blinking of the stars. It wouldn’t be hard to forget that you were looking at paint and canvas and not out a window. Admiring it, picking apart the artistry, is helpful, because James is late—at least latter than usual—and the beautiful painting is helping to keep Regulus’s thoughts occupied.

Well...sort of.

When his thoughts do drift he tries to focus on the good parts of this morning. On James’s arms around him, his soft kisses across his face, in his hair, him whispering that Regulus was safe. That he was okay. He focuses on the smaller details—the specific feel of his hands, the warmth, the slight pressure, the tickle of his thumb brushing Regulus’s cheek.

He tries not to think about the fact that Sirius knows about them.

Or about what Mary may or may not have told James.

Regulus shakes his head, trying to clear his thoughts.

Just think about his hands.

Just think about the night sky.

The door opens behind him but Regulus doesn’t turn around, he just closes his eyes and exhales. James came. He came. He came. There’s a moment of hesitation, James quiet, which

is unusual for him, but eventually Regulus can hear his footsteps approaching, stopping just behind him.

“You can touch me.”

“Regulus.”

And he knows just from the sound his voice that something is wrong.

“Please,” Reg says. “I just need a minute before we—please can you just touch me?” It’s pathetic. He knows it is. And unfair. But he asks for it anyway. And of course, James gives. His arms strong and warm as they wrap around Regulus, pulling him back into his chest.

“I’ve never noticed this one before,” he gestures to the painting in front of them.

“No,” Reg says slowly, eyes running it over one more time. “Me neither. And then today—it was the first thing my eyes went to when I came in.”

James hums, the vibrations shooting through Regulus.

“It’s beautiful.”

You’re beautiful, Regulus doesn’t say. He’s not sure why exactly. Except maybe that he has a feeling that today James might not say it back.

Regulus takes advantage of the new silence between them. Cataloging, in the greatest detail, everything about this moment—this feeling—because he doesn’t know what’s coming but he knows it isn’t good, knows his days of this are dwindling and he wants to remember everything about it.

“I can see you,” James says suddenly.

Regulus blinks, tilting his head to look up. “See me?”

James gestures to the painting with his chin. “The stars. I can see you—in the sky.”

“Oh,” it comes out more like a breath than a word and Regulus doesn’t know why it aches. Maybe because this is where they started. Looking at stars in the sky. Eventually James sighs, breath tickling Regulus’s ear.

“Reg.”

“I know.”

“Okay.”

He breathes in, bringing his arms up to pull James more tightly around him. He gives himself five more seconds.

One.

James is wearing a crimson jumper. Not his Gryffindor one but close enough. He almost always dresses in house colours. Regulus doesn't know if it's on purpose but he suspects it isn't.

Two.

He smells clean. He must have showered since this morning. He uses generic soap and some sort of pine-y aftershave.

Three.

James is bigger than Regulus, so when they stand like this it's like he blocks out the whole world. All there is is James.

Four.

Sometimes his glasses hurt Regulus's nose when they kiss. But for some reason he likes it. It reminds him that he's kissing James Potter every time they press into his skin.

Five.

He never knew the difference between a house and a home before this.

Regulus opens his eyes and forces himself out of James's arms, turning to face him. James looks wretched; tired and pale, eyes red rimmed. Like maybe he hasn't been crying exactly, but he's certainly been coming close.

"Sirius?" Regulus guesses, but James shakes his head.

"Regulus."

"Please stop saying my name like that," like it causes you pain.

James sighs before going to sit on the end of the bed. He rests his elbows on his knees, hands clasped, head hung. Regulus stays where he is.

"I talked to Mary again," James says finally.

Regulus does his best not to grimace. "Okay."

James isn't looking at him—can't look at him—which is never good. Regulus resists the urge to tug his sleeve more firmly over his forearm. She wouldn't have done that would she? She wouldn't have told him? Not after her warning today?

"You told me this morning that you weren't there, for her attack," James goes on carefully, like he's afraid that if he speaks too forcefully he or Regulus or both of them will shatter. He might not be wrong. Regulus watches James's shoulders heave up and down as he finally lifts his eyes. "That was a lie."

It's not really a question, but Regulus feels he owes him an answer anyway.

“Yes.”

James nods, though the movement is jerky. Regulus watches him fight with himself, watches him chew on his bottom lip.

“Why?” the word sounds small.

Regulus has to clear his throat before he speaks, afraid of what he’ll sound like otherwise.

“Why what?”

James looks so fucking sad. “Why did you lie?”

“You know why.”

James arches his brow but doesn’t give Regulus anything else. Doesn’t offer him an out, just waits for him to explain himself, to say the cowardly words out loud.

“Because. Because you would never have understood.”

“Understood what?”

Regulus throws his hands up in frustration. “Why I had to do it.”

James just keeps looking at him and suddenly Regulus wishes he would go back to staring at his knees. That was easier to deal with than this scrutiny.

“Why you had to wipe her memory in order to protect her attackers?”

Regulus looks at him helplessly. “Yes. They’re my friends.”

“How? How can they be your friends after what they did? How can you of all people—“

“Don’t do that,” Regulus snaps.

James is starting to look annoyed. “Don’t do what?”

“‘You of all people’ as though me and Mary Macdonald have anything in common.”

The pity is worse than the annoyance. “Reg, they raped her.”

“They didn’t. I stopped them.”

But James tilts his head back, letting out a sigh like he’s looking for help from some higher power. “Her shirt was off.”

“I stopped them.” Regulus says through gritted teeth, hands in fists. “Nothing happened.”

“Clearly something happened. And more would have if you hadn’t stepped in. How can you just get over that? How can you protect them after that? Surely you can sympathize with her?”

“Why?” Regulus asks coldly. “I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but I don’t sympathize with most people.”

James looks genuinely surprised by that statement. “That’s not true.”

“I promise you it is.”

James just shakes his head, running a hand over his face and somehow managing to look both years younger and older than he is. “I don’t understand how you can be angry at me right now.”

“I’m not angry at you,” Regulus says, though even he has to admit that he certainly sounds angry. “I’m not angry at you,” he repeats. “I’m just...it sounds so simple when you just say things but in the moment...there are so many factors that I have to consider all the time, so many ramifications that are so much bigger than what happens in this fucking school.” When James just looks back at him blankly Regulus forces himself to continue.

“Evan, Barty, they’re my only allies. If I lose them I will have no one to watch my back. I don’t agree with everything they do and God knows they can be fucking morons sometimes but I—I will not survive without them on my side. Do you understand?”

He’s trying to. Regulus knows he’s trying to. James always tries. But he also knows that James Potter will never really be able to understand.

“It’s...bad Regulus,” James finally says. “It’s wrong. It’s—I get that things are, are really messed up right now,” he doesn’t. He doesn’t get it at all, “but what happened to Mary is so far outside of what is okay. And you helped it happen, helped them get away with it.”

“I told them they were idiots.”

James lets out a cold laugh. “Idiots? Regulus they raped her.”

“STOP SAYING THAT.”

His voice is violent. It fills up the space and rattles his teeth. It’s dead silent afterwards, like a bomb has just gone off, James’s eyes wide behind his glasses.

“Okay,” James says eventually, like he’s speaking to a frightened animal. He runs a hand through his hair clearly trying to regroup. “Okay,” he looks back at Regulus and suddenly seems so lost. “I don’t know where we go from here.”

Regulus knows how it’s going to sound before he says it. How childish. How petulant. But it doesn’t stop the words from coming out of his mouth. “We go to bed.”

“Reg—“

“We go to bed and we sleep and we wake up and we move on because it’s done and over and we can’t change it.”

James just keeps looking at him like a kicked puppy. “I can’t do that.”

You can,

Regulus wants to argue. Wants desperately to argue.

You can. I know you can. I do it all the time. Just don't think about it. Just lock it away. I'll show you. I'll teach you.

You can.

You can.

You can.

"I know," Regulus sighs, shoulders sagging as he turns away from James, unable to stand looking at him anymore. He grips the mantle of the fireplace, trying to give himself a moment to think.

"What—" he starts and then stops, working to get his voice back under control. "What do you need me to do James?" he asks finally, speaking to the wall. "Tell me and I'll do it."

More silence. God Regulus fucking hates silence.

After a few minutes he hears the sound of James getting up, coming towards him. He wraps Regulus in his arms again and Reg is so grateful that he actually makes an embarrassing whining noise as he collapses back into James's chest.

"I know that being in that house, with your mother, with—with all of them, I know it has you all twisted up," he says softly. Regulus isn't sure that that's entirely true. It seems like it's letting him off the hook far too easily, but James is holding him again, is speaking into his neck, so he isn't about to argue.

Eventually James sighs. "You know what I want Reg," he says wearily. "I want you to leave. I want you to come home with me when school is done. Don't go back to them."

Regulus feels himself tense, his grip on the mantle tightening. Somehow they always end up back here.

"I can't do that."

"Can't or won't?"

The edge in James's voice nags at Regulus and he shrugs off James's arms, stepping away from the fireplace.

"I don't understand why we're having this conversation again."

"Because you never give me a straight answer," James snaps.

"I do. I have. I don't know what else you want from me," somewhere between angry and desperate.

“I want you to be honest with me.”

“I am honest with you.”

“Bullshit,” James takes a step forward, finger pointing accusingly at Regulus. “You lied to me this fucking morning. Or have you already forgotten that?”

Regulus splutters. “That’s—we’re not even talking about that anymore.”

“Yes we are! We’re talking about all of it. You lie all the time Regulus, do you think I can’t see it? Do you think I don’t notice?”

Yes,

Regulus doesn’t say, because he can’t see how that would help.

“Do you even feel bad about it?” James asks, when Regulus doesn’t bother to answer his previous question.

“About what?” he says coldly.

“Lying?”

“No.”

“No?”

“No. No I don’t feel bad. I’m protecting you.”

James’s eyes go so wide Regulus is surprised they manage to stay in their sockets.

“Protecting me?” he demands indignantly. “Are you kidding?”

“Don’t act like that’s some outrageous—”

“It is outrageous!”

“No it’s not!”

They’re both shouting now, cheeks flushed and chests heaving, Regulus prays to Merlin that these walls are magically sound proof.

“You think your parents don’t lie to you?” Regulus demands. “You think they don’t keep things from you? That they haven’t done that your whole goddamn life so that they can stop you from being hurt or scarred or—I don’t know—bloody traumatized?” something other than anger has snuck into Regulus’s voice, something desperate and heartbreakingly young. “You know what I wouldn’t give to have people in my life who loved me enough to lie to me? I don’t want this,” he holds his arms out plaintively. “I don’t want to know the truth, I don’t want to see how things really are. I am so fucking tired of reality. I wish someone had fucking protected me from it.”

James is already shaking his head, hands pulling at his face. “Fuck Reg, lying and protecting people are two different things,” he says. “And regardless, you aren’t my parents, you can’t protect me.”

“I—“

But James cuts him off. “No you can’t, you really can’t, and more than that, you can’t lie to protect me from you. Like have you even thought about that? That the person your lies are trying to protect me from is YOU?”

Regulus flinches. He’s sure James didn’t mean it to be cruel but that doesn’t change the fact that it is. Doesn’t change the overwhelming wave of emotions that it drags up in Regulus as he lets those words sink in. Because no, no he hadn’t thought about it.

There’s the sound of breaking glass and both of them startle, turning to see that the mirror behind James has shattered.

Regulus hasn’t lost control of his magic like that since he was a kid.

“Was that you?” James asks eventually, voice rough.

Regulus closes his eyes for a minute, breathing out slowly through his nose. “Sorry.”

“Regulus,” James’s voice breaks on his name as he steps closer but Regulus only shakes his head.

“I don’t want to be something you need to be protected from. But I know that I am. I know. I hate it. I hate myself. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

“Hey—woah, no, Reg, that isn’t what I meant. I’m not trying to say—“ he cuts himself off, clearly frustrated, then starts again. “You aren’t a bad person.”

“Oh come on James.”

“You aren’t,” James says emphatically. “You just—“ he struggles with the words before eventually giving up. “Look, I love you—“

“No don’t—“ Regulus instantly recoils. “Don’t say that just because you think it’ll make the hard stuff easier to hear. I don’t—“ he looks about himself, grasping for the right words.

“Please don’t say it if you don’t mean it. And not in some abstract “I loved you before maybe I’ll love you again” kind of way. Don’t say it unless you mean it right now, because this is who I am right now. All of the stuff I’ve done...I can’t go back. I can’t be who I was before. Even if that person was easier to love. So don’t say it unless you’re saying it to me, now. Unless you mean it right now.” He feels desperate as words fall drunkenly from his mouth, all stumbling into one another.

James takes his time answering. Takes too much time in Regulus’s opinion. His lovely face all screwed up, his brows pulled together, his bottom lip caught between his teeth. The worst of it is, Regulus is still lying. James still doesn’t know about the Mark. About Jonathan. And despite the situation he’s in right now, Regulus has no intention of telling him.

“I always mean it,” James says finally, causing something like a sob to come out of Regulus’s mouth. “C’mon Reg, you have to—“ he takes a moment to gather himself. “You must know that? I’m yours remember? And you’re mine. My person. You said that.”

“I did,” Regulus doesn’t know how he manages to speak.

James nods, like that confirms something for him. “I always mean it,” he repeats. “I always will.”

It’s such a big word.

Always.

Regulus wants desperately to believe in it.

He doesn’t. But he wants to.

It terrifies him that James does.

A long moment passes before either of them speak again. But eventually Regulus finds his voice. “What were you going to say?”

James blinks. “What?”

“It sounded like you had more to say, before I cut you off. ‘I love you but’...?” he isn’t sure he wants to know, and by the look on James’s face, he isn’t sure he wants to tell him.

“I love you,” James repeats, voice worn out, “but I can’t—I’m not sure how to forgive you right now. I think I need...” he exhales shakily, looking down for a moment. “I think I need a break, for a minute, to...sort out how to...deal with this. How deal with Sirius.”

It takes a herculean effort for Regulus to keep his expression passive. “A break.”

James grimaces. “I know how that sounds—“

“It sounds reasonable.”

“Don’t do that,” James sighs.

“Don’t do what?”

James waves a hand in his direction. “Shut down on me. I—I’m not going anywhere Regulus.”

“Except on a break.”

James looks back at him, helpless. “I know how it sounds,” he repeats, voice cracking. “I just got you back you think I want—you think I don’t want to fall asleep in that bed with you? That I don’t want to touch you and listen to you talk and kiss every fucking part of you? I

want it. I want you. I always want you. I just—it's tearing me up right now. And I can't...I can't sort it out."

The frustrating thing, is that Regulus knows that he means it, every word. Because unlike Regulus, James Potter is not a liar.

"Look, I'm not walking away okay?" he says a little desperately, eyes red. "I'm not even thinking about it. I'm just trying to figure out how to stay."

Which is fair.

Regulus hates it.

Hates every word coming out of his mouth.

But it's fair.

"Okay," he says finally.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah James," Regulus nods. "I...understand. I just—" this part is always hard. The vulnerable bit. The ooey gooey feelings that can turn sharp so quickly. "I miss you."

James gives him a broken smile. "I know. I miss you too. So fucking much Reg."

Okay, he thinks.

This is okay.

Because James isn't a liar. And he said he wants to stay.

"I should go I guess," James says eventually, eyes trailing back to the broken mirror on the ground.

"Okay," because apparently that's the only word Regulus knows anymore.

James looks like he wants to say more but stops himself. "I'll—er—I'll come find you okay? When I'm ready to...when I'm ready."

"Okay," Regulus almost cringes at the weakness in his voice.

James makes his way slowly to the door, hand pausing on the handle. "I really do love you Regulus," he says meaningfully. "Right now. At this moment."

Regulus doesn't look at him. Can't look at him. "I love you too."

He hears more than he sees James leave, the door closing behind him with a foreboding finality. For a long time Regulus just stands frozen in the middle of the room where James left him, but after a while he feels his feet start to move. He ends up in front of the broken mirror, some of the pieces cracking under his shoes as he steps closer.

It's a minute before he notices the initials in the wall where the mirror had previously been hanging. They're carved into the stone but not like they would be if it had been done by students—scratched in with nails or knives or some other rudimentary tool. These look like they were done on purpose. By magic. Though Regulus isn't sure how, it would take a great deal of power to be able to manipulate this room like that—to make it do something it didn't want to.

G & S

The letters tangle around one another, inseparable. Regulus finds himself reaching out, fingers tracing the pathways through the stone. For the first time he wonders if they aren't the only people to find this room. I mean yes, the Come and Go Room has obviously been used by other people at different points in time but this manifestation of the room specifically, Regulus always assumed existed just for him and James. And yet...

G & S

"Did you come here too?" he asks stupidly. "Did it keep you safe?"

There's no answer, of course. No one around to hear. Eventually Regulus lets his hand drop back down to his side. He hopes they're okay, whoever they are—were—hopes they're still together like this, wrapped around one another. It makes him feel better to think that.

"Sorry I broke your mirror," he says eventually, stepping back from the wall. "I promise I'll fix it."

He slides his wand out of his sleeve and after a few attempts at various domestic spells he finally finds one that works, all the pieces of the mirror flying back together, the cracks between them disappearing completely.

"There," he says softly, satisfied that he was able to fix something for once, the initials covered. "Safe again."

Chapter End Notes

AHH

Okay

Okay

Idk, maybe the beginning doesn't work? I've honestly gone back and forth on it so much but I like it, so I've just decided it works.

I've always thought the founders were cool and I just couldn't resist playing with the tension always specifically mentioned between Godric and Salazar so hopefully you

guys also found those parallels between Godric and Salazar and James and Regulus interesting but if not I'm sorry.

ALSO Sirius is coming back, I promise, it was supposed to be this chapter but it just didn't feel right, so sorry for being a tease.

OKAY thank you, I am gonna go quietly stress about this chapter now :) :)

Chapter 38

Chapter Summary

Barty Crouch Junior's villain origin story (jk he was always a lil bitch)

Chapter Notes

tw: discussions of homophobia / internalized homophobia

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

PART I JAMES

The next few days are lonely.

In fact, James is fairly certain it's the most lonely he's ever felt in his entire life.

Sirius and Remus don't come back to the dorm but they do start coming to classes again. Sitting alone, away from James and Peter. Remus shoots James apologetic glances whenever they take the desks on the other side of the room. Sirius doesn't look at him at all. Doesn't come to the Great Hall or speak to anyone but Remus, at least not as far as James can tell.

It's all far too reminiscent of last year. The four of them broken up, not speaking, not even looking at one another. James hates it. He thinks about just going down to the shack and forcing Sirius to talk to him. Thinks about it a lot actually. About what he would say, and how they would yell and scream but by the end everything would be okay. He never actually goes of course. Remus asked him to give Sirius time so he does. He just wishes Sirius didn't need so much of it.

James floats between Quidditch practice and class. He talks to Peter—talks to Remus when he's alone—but other than that he mostly keeps his head down. Every night he lies awake in bed and feels the pull to go to Regulus. A few times—pathetic times—he pulls out the map to see if Regulus is there, in their room. To see if he's waiting for James despite everything. But of course he isn't. Regulus has too much self respect for that.

James doesn't know how to fix things. Not with Regulus, not with Sirius. And so the floating continues. James can't help but feel like he's fading a little bit. An empty version of himself, just going through the motions.

"I'm thinking about starting a chess club."

James blinks, coming back to the breakfast table and looking up at Peter while he chews thoughtfully on the bacon sandwich he's just made for himself.

"A chess club?" James asks, trying to make sure he's heard him right.

"Yeah," Peter says, wiping his mouth clean on the back of his hand. "Like, you know, you have Quidditch, maybe I could have chess?"

James refrains from explaining all the ways in which a chess team and a Quidditch team are radically different things.

"Sure, yeah, okay," he says instead. "I didn't realize you were that into chess?"

Peter shrugs. "Well, I'm not exactly. But I feel like I could be y'know? Like I'm never going to be a Quidditch star no matter how hard I try—"

"You don't know that," James says automatically, earning him a skeptical look from Peter.

"Uh, yeah, I think I do. BUT," he says before James can interrupt again. "I could be a chess star if I just put a little more effort into it. It might not be Quidditch but," another shrug. "A trophy is a trophy right?"

He looks at James hopefully and James can't bring himself to say anything even remotely negative. "Sure, definitely. I think that's—er—a great idea."

"Really?" Peter asks, looking far too happy about this.

"Er—'course."

"Maybe I'll put up posters yeah? See who's interested. Hold try-outs."

James has no idea what the hell chess tryouts would even look like.

"Hey, would you help?" Peter asks, eyes all big and hopeful. Fucking damnit Peter. "Since you've done it so many times before—tryouts I mean—you could give me some pointers?"

"Er—"

Luckily, James is saved from having to continue this conversation by the arrival of the post. Hoot choosing that moment to land gracefully on the table beside him, only narrowly avoiding stepping in a bowl of porridge. He very insistently starts nudging at James's shoulder with his beak.

"Hey buddy," James gives his dignified head a little pat before untying the letter around his leg. Hoot shuffles forward staring very pointedly at the plate of cold cuts in the middle of the table. James laughs.

"Not exactly subtle are you?" he swears Hoot glares at him. "Alright, alright, no jokes before treats. Got it." James tosses him a piece of ham and with the contented flutter of his wings Hoot catches it and flies off.

“Who’s the letter from?” Peter asks, as James slides his hand under the wax seal.

“Mum,” he says without looking up. He wrote to her the morning after he talked to Lily in the courtyard. It’s about the only useful thing he’s managed to do recently.

Dear chicken,

His mother writes.

Glad to hear you’re doing well and that Quidditch is back on track - I promise me and your father will make it up for your final match (which, if I’m not mistaken, is shaping up to be against Slytherin again is it not?) we’ve both just been a bit slammed with work recently.

Anyway - Lily Evans, huh? Goodness, that’s a name I haven’t heard in a while. I must tell you, Jamie darling, I am rather thrilled to learn that the two of you have become friends. You were always so obsessed with the girl, it seemed a shame you two could never get along.

About your request - of course it is absolutely ridiculous that Muggle-born families don’t have access to the Floo. I’ve talked to some of our friends at the Ministry and Dumbledore as well, I expect she’ll hear from him before the week is out. If not, let me know and I’ll march up to the school and sort it myself.

I love you very, very much.

Sincerely, her majesty,

Your mum.

James smiles down at the letter, “Brilliant,” he murmurs, before folding it up and sliding it into his pocket. He really does love his mum.

He shoves a piece of toast in his mouth before throwing his bag over his shoulder and getting to his feet. “I’ll see you in class alright Pete? I gotta go talk to Evans.”

Peter looks vaguely surprised but doesn’t question him. “Yeah alright. See y’ah.”

It’s only the two of them at breakfast today, Remus having already come and gone, bringing Sirius his food. James thinks it’s starting to wear on Remus a little bit, spending so much time in the shack. But he’s not sure that criticizing the location of Sirius’s self-imposed exile is going to go over well with either of them at the moment.

“Hey guys,” James joins the sixth year girls a little ways down the table from where him and Pete had been sitting. They all look up briefly, Mary giving him a vague nod and Marlene a wave before they go back to whatever it is they were talking about.

“Are you abandoning Peter then?” Lily asks, looking slightly amused as she scoots over to make room for him.

He smiles, shaking his head. “Nah, never. Just wondered if maybe I could talk to you before class?” he nods in the direction of the doors, not missing the significant looks that Marlene and Mary send him across the table.

Lily looks surprised for about a minute before she recovers. “Uh—yeah, yeah sure. Of course.” She grabs her stuff and slides out from under the table. “See you lot later yeah?” she tosses over her shoulder.

“You two have fun,” Mary says in a sing-song voice. “Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do!”

Lily gives her a flat look at the same time that Marlene shakes her head, hissing under her breath; “Merlin Mary, really?”

“What?” Mary says innocently as they walk away.

They’re quiet leaving the Great Hall, James shoving his hands awkwardly in his pockets, not quite sure what to say or how to start.

“Here,” once they’re in the corridor he quickly guides them into the nearest empty classroom, certain he doesn’t want to do this in the foyer.

“Is it something serious?” Lily asks when he closes the door behind them. “Is it about the map?”

James feels his chest tighten but quickly shakes it off. “No, no, nothing like that. I just wasn’t sure how much you’d told anybody else about—or if you’d want them to know...” for some reason the ends of his sentences seem to be alluding him today. Eventually he sighs, pulling out his mum’s letter and handing it to her.

“I wrote to my mum,” he says as he watches her unfold it.

She looks up at him briefly and then back down at the page, immediately letting out a bubble of laughter. “Chicken?”

James rolls his eyes. “Yeah, yeah, yeah,” he says, though he can feel his cheeks heating up. “Just read the third paragraph.”

She raises her brow, eyes skimming the letter. He sees the moment she understands. The moment the words sink in. “Oh,” she says softly. “Really?”

She looks up and James offers her a smile. “Told you my mum was brilliant.”

“I—“ she sounds a little choked, hand coming to the base of her neck. “James this is really, really, really...” she seems to be at a loss for words. “Nice,” she finally settles on.

James laughs, he can’t help it. “Well, I’ve been known to be nice from time to time. I think it’s Remus’s doing really. Some of his good must’ve rubbed off on me.”

She gives him a quizzical look, letter still held tight in her hands, like if she lets it go it won't be real anymore. "I can never tell, when you're being self-deprecating like that, if you really believe it or if you're just trying to be charming."

He arches his brow. "You think I'm charming?"

Lily rolls her eyes. "Rarely."

"That's not a no Evans," he gives her a wink.

Lily tries and fails to look unimpressed with him, her eyes eventually dropping back down to the letter. "Thank you for this," she exhales, pausing for a moment before she hands it back to him. "I know I'm probably just being silly but it—but I really want to see her and I never would have been able to without your help."

James shrugs, trying to ignore the tickling feeling in his stomach. "Of course."

"I mean it," she reaches out and squeezes his arm. She really is too pretty for her own good. Or maybe for his own good. He can't decide which. "Thank you."

They're standing closer than James realized and suddenly he feels his mouth go dry. "It's—"

They aren't doing anything wrong.

Aren't sneaking around.

Aren't breaking any rules.

Aren't...doing whatever else students get up to in empty classrooms.

So James isn't sure why the sound of the door opening is so jarring, why it sends a quick flash of panic through him. Maybe it's intuition. His mother did mention he had a Great Aunt who was a seer. Maybe he knows what's coming without realizing it. Because really it doesn't matter that someone is walking in on them. They're only talking. It's nothing. Not even the Hogwarts' gossips could turn this encounter into news. Except that, of course, it isn't the gossips who are at the door.

It's Reg.

For half a heartbeat he just stands there, staring, his eyes going to the point where Lily's hand still rests on James's arm. James doesn't know why he suddenly feels like he's been caught cheating. Because he hasn't. But the look on Regulus's face... it's only there for a second, barely that, before he's able to wipe his face clean. But that second is enough to make every inch of James ache.

Regulus doesn't say anything, just turns around and lets the door slam behind him on his way out, James watching helplessly.

"Um," Lily says after the poignant silence that follows, letting go of him. "Is everything alright?"

James swallows. “Yeah, of course, I just need to...I need to go,” he looks back at her. “You’ll tell me, when they let you talk to your mum? Tell me when you find out she’s alright?”

Something flickers across her face that James doesn’t know what to do with, already half-way to the door.

“You care about my mum?” she asks quietly. That question enough to make James pause.

He looks back at her. “Of course,” he says and then, nearly; I care about you. But that seems like too much somehow so he leaves it as is. “See you, yeah?”

“Yeah,” he hears her mutter as the door closes behind him and he finds himself in an unhelpfully empty corridor. He looks left to right, running a nervous hand through his hair and wondering if he should go get the map. Where the fuck would Reg go?

He hears voices around the corner, no doubt people slowly making their way out of the Great Hall and towards their first period classes. James starts walking in the opposite direction, deciding that’s what Reg would do. That he would want to be alone.

James can’t stop his brain from pulling up the image of Regulus’s face when he’d first opened the door. Fuck. James really needs to fix this. He knows exactly what Reg will be thinking and he can’t even blame him this time because first James asks for a break and then Regulus walks in on him and Lily in an empty classroom. He knows that Lily sets Reg off like no one else. That he feels insecure around her, always has.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

He pulls up short when he rounds the next corner and finds Regulus at the back of a dead-end hallway, sitting on the ground with his back pressed to the wall, staring straight ahead. He doesn’t look up, not even when James manages to get his legs working again.

“Reg?” he asks, voice quiet as he stops by his side. Standing feels incredibly awkward but he can’t help but feel that he doesn’t deserve to sit down. Regulus doesn’t answer, just keeps staring at the wall across from him, face blank, though his eyes—James thinks his eyes give him away. They look...bruised.

“I was just helping her get into contact with her mum,” James says. “I—I don’t know how it looked—“

“You must know how it looked,” Regulus says coldly. “Since you’re here.”

Which, of course, is true.

“I’d rather not do this,” Regulus says after a moment.

James feels the bottom of his stomach drop, like someone’s just thrown him from the astronomy tower. “Rather not do what?” he asks weakly.

Regulus still isn’t looking at him. “You want to finish with me you finish with me. I’m not interested in being let down easily or whatever it is that you think that you’re doing. Just—

just walk away James. Put us both out of our misery.”

For a second all James can do is stare at him, an uncomfortable storm of emotions waging in his chest.

“Our misery?” he repeats finally. “Do I make you miserable Reg? Does being with me make you miserable?”

Regulus rolls his eyes. “Don’t be stupid.”

“Right back at you.”

Finally, the younger boy looks up.

“I don’t want to finish with you,” James says stubbornly. “You know that. I told you that.”

“Well you’ll excuse me if I find it hard to believe when you’re out here holding hands with Lily Evans.”

James doesn’t bother to point out that they weren’t actually holding hands. “I want to be with you. I love you. I need space so that I can figure out how to move past this, but I do want to move past this.”

Regulus holds James’s stare but his expression doesn’t shift. “Wanting to, and being able to, are different things.”

James growls. “Jesus Christ Regulus, what do you want from me?”

Regulus doesn’t answer, just keeps looking up at him with the same passive expression. Almost bored. And James knows that it’s an act. He knows. But sometimes it’s so hard to remember, especially when he’s feeling so raw. So vulnerable.

Eventually he sighs, running a hand through his hair. “Sometimes—“ he starts and then stops, not at all sure how to get this out. “Sometimes I feel like I’m trying so hard to keep us a float, and all you’re doing is looking for ways to sink us,” he opens his arms, offering up his palms in surrender. In desperation. “I want to do this Regulus, I don’t know how many more times or ways I can say it. But I can’t do it on my own.” He looks at him pleadingly. “I need to know that we’re in this together. That you’re not just waiting for us to fail so you can point your finger and go “I told you so.”

For the first time Regulus’s mask cracks. Flickers of pain and desperation bleeding through. After a few more seconds of silence James crouches down, bringing them eye level.

“I need you to stop treating us like we’re doomed,” he whispers, feeling the need to be soft now that they’re so close. “Because I don’t believe that we are. I can’t.”

A wounded noise escapes Regulus before he immediately closes his eyes, like it’s too much. Like he can’t bare to feel and see and hear James all at the same time. It’s another few seconds before Regulus speaks.

“You wanna know what the really pathetic part is?” he says finally, eyes still shut. “When I saw you with her I wasn’t even angry. I just thought “they look so beautiful together,” his voice cracks and for a moment James can’t breathe it hurts so bad. “I just thought “this is how it’s supposed to be,” he shakes his head. “I’ll never look like that, standing next to you.”

“Look like what?” James whispers.

Wrinkles appear at the corners of Regulus’s eyes. “Right,” he says on his next exhale. “I’ll never look right. I’ll never belong. No one will ever look at us the way they look at you and her.”

And James doesn’t know what to say—there are so many things that his brain almost short circuits—by the time he opens his mouth he has no idea what’s coming out of it.

“I will,” he says simply. “I’ll look at us that way.” Maybe that sounds stupid, he doesn’t know.

Regulus lets out a shaky breath. “Oh,” he says weakly.

James knows they’re in the hallway. Knows it’s Reckless. All of this is reckless. But before he can stop himself he leans over and places a kiss on the top of Regulus’s head. Quick and chaste. And when he pulls away Regulus chases him, leaning into his side.

“You will always belong with me Reg,” James whispers against his temple. “Always.”

Regulus sighs, pressing into him like he can’t be close enough. “You really mean that,” it’s more of a statement than a question, but it’s said with enough awe that James feels compelled to answer anyway. Just to make sure Regulus believes it. Make sure he hears it.

“Yeah,” he says softly, placing another quick kiss on the side of his head. “I really do.”

PART II SIRIUS

He’s lying on his back on the floor of the Shrieking Shack, Remus tucked into his side, head resting on his shoulder. Both of them stare up at the window in front of them as the sky turns black and the stars come out to play. There’s a draft sneaking through the floorboards but it’s alright, Remus always runs hot, a furnace nestled under Sirius’s arm.

“I’m just saying,” he goes on. “I think a Unicorn could take a Centaur in a fight.”

Remus tries to make a dismissive noise but it comes out too much like laughter. “And I’m just saying that that is the answer to a question that nobody asked.”

“Um, excuse me,” he tickles Remus’s side making him squirm and giggle which is such a delightful noise that Sirius does it again.

“Oi! Stop that!” Remus swats his hand away but doesn’t manage to keep from smiling, Sirius feels rather smug about it.

“Someone did ask the question,” Sirius goes on. “And that someone was me.”

“I’m not even certain that’s true at this point.”

“No it is,” Sirius says indignantly. “I asked; which two magical creatures you’d most want to watch fight.”

“And I refused to answer on the grounds that it’s an idiotic and vaguely insulting question.”

Sirius rolls his eyes. “Listen, we can talk about which two Hogwarts students we’d like to fight next if it’ll make you feel better. Anyway, you were being no fun—“

“I was being a morally conscious human being you mean.”

“Like I said, no fun. So I answered: Unicorn and a Centaur. Because I think the Unicorn would kick the Centaur’s ass and that would be hilarious.”

Remus snorts. “Why would it be hilarious?”

“Because Centaurs are pompous assholes and Unicorns are famously underrated.”

“What!” Remus squawks. “In what world are unicorns famously underrated? Unicorns are very rated.”

“Pretty sure that isn’t a saying Moons, and I don’t have time to explain to you everything that’s wrong with the cultural interpretation of Unicorns right now.”

“Oh you don’t do you?” Remus asks teasingly. “And why’s that? You got somewhere to be?”

Sirius turns his head to the side only to find that Remus is already staring back at him. Their noses brush. “I’ve just got other plans for tonight that’s all,” he says, voice low.

Remus arches his brow. “Do you now?”

“Mhm,” Sirius uses his arm to pull Remus in closer—just those last few inches so that their mouths can touch.

Sirius has kissed a respectable number of people. He’s always liked kissing. Liked the things that follow kissing too. But being with Remus is something else. The electricity that shoots through Sirius when Remus opens up for him, when he feels his teeth pulling on his lip, or scraping down his neck. Remus kisses like it’s the only thing he wants to do.

His hands slide under Sirius’s shirt and up his sides, making him shiver. “You cold?” Remus asks against his lips.

“No,” Sirius moves, swinging his leg over Remus’s hip, straddling him. Remus is flush and disheveled beneath him, just as Sirius likes him. “Definitely not cold,” he breathes, before

ducking back down, taking Remus's mouth with enough force that Remus moans. Hands running up Sirius's back, through his hair, pulling lightly.

"As much as I'm enjoying this," Remus murmurs after a few minutes. "This floor is fucking killing me."

"Ah," Sirius sits up, eyeing the dirty mattress on the other side of the room. When his gaze comes back Remus's mouth has pulled itself into a firm line.

"No way in hell am I having sex on that thing."

Sirius sighs dramatically, slumping off of Remus and back onto the floor beside him. They lie shoulder to shoulder for a moment, both of them still trying to catch their breath. Remus clears his throat. In Sirius's experience, that's never a good sign.

"We do have two perfectly good beds we could use."

Sirius glares up at the ceiling. "No."

"Not sure you can say no, it's just a fact."

"Don't be a prick."

He feels Remus shuffle beside him, turning on his side to look at Sirius who keeps his eyes stubbornly on the ceiling.

"Sirius," he says softly. "You can't avoid this forever."

"You underestimate me."

Remus reaches out, brushing his fingers gently against Sirius's arm, causing Sirius's eyes to flutter closed. There's a long period of silence, long enough that Sirius has started to drift off to the steady feeling of Remus's touch. And then;

"I can't do this for much longer Sirius," he almost whispers. "I can't...be here. All the time. It's too...hard."

Sirius's eyes open and he turns his head, meeting Remus's stare. "Oh," he says, and then; "Shit, Moons I didn't—fuck."

"It's okay, it is but—I mean we just, none of us can keep going like this Sirius. James is—"

"Don't."

Remus sighs beside him before sitting up, arms draping over his knees. "He misses you."

"I said don't."

"Yeah I know," Remus pinches the bridge of his nose, shoulders tense. "But you've been saying 'don't' for a week now and it's enough. You have to talk to him," and then; "Don't

think I don't know you miss him too."

Which is true, of course. James is Sirius's other fucking half. That's why this is so hard. Why he has no idea what to do with all the feelings that bubble up inside of him at the thought of his best friend. It's easier not to think about it. Not to touch those wounds. That's how you survive. A lesson he learned from his mother.

"He isn't..." he exhales, scrubbing at his face. "He isn't who I thought he was."

Remus reaches over and runs a hand through Sirius's hair. It feels nice. It always feels nice when Remus touches him. "You sure about that?"

"I trusted him," Sirius says weakly. "I needed to trust him. To believe that I could—that it was possible. I needed him to be—"

"Perfect?"

Sirius screws up his face. "No, just...I don't know. Better, I guess. I needed to believe that people could be better. Could care for one another better than..."

Remus gives him a minute before filling the silence. "That's a lot of pressure to put on one person—restoring your faith in humanity."

Sirius sighs, "Maybe," though it never felt like it was something he put on James, it just felt like it was who James was.

"Anyone else," Sirius murmurs eventually, repeating the words that have been running laps around his head since he first found out. "He could have chosen anyone else and I wouldn't have given a fuck. Anyone else. Just not...Reg. Just not...fuck," he squeezes his eyes shut again. He hates this. Hates how out of control it makes him feel.

He hates them both.

He loves them both.

At this particular moment he'd be happy not to feel anything about either of them at all.

"I don't think there's a lot of choice in these things," Remus says finally, fingers still carding through Sirius's hair.

Sirius frowns. "There's always a choice."

"You think?"

"Yes," Sirius says firmly. Some choices hurt and some choices feel good and some choices linger for days and months and years. But there are always choices, and anyone who says otherwise is just too much of a coward to take responsibility for the ones they've made.

"So," Remus clears his throat nervously, hand stilling in Sirius's hair. "So you...chose me then?"

Sirius blinks, trying to follow this new direction in the conversation. He looks over at Remus, confused. “Of course?”

Something flickers across Remus’s face that Sirius doesn’t understand.

“You thought I didn’t?” he asks. “You thought—what?—what did you think?”

Remus looks away briefly, swallowing with some difficulty. “No I—I guess I just assumed that if you felt like you had a choice you...wouldn’t...choose me.”

Sirius just stares at him for a minute, running over those words several more times, trying to figure out if he’s misheard somehow. If they might have some other meaning he isn’t aware of.

“Moons—Remus, look at me yeah?” and Remus does, light patches of pink on the tops of his cheeks, like he’s embarrassed. “Don’t take this the wrong way, but that’s the stupidest shit you’ve ever said, like ever in your entire life.”

Remus laughs like he can’t help it.

“I mean it,” he reaches over and tugs on Remus’s arm. “I can’t—I chose you. I chose this. I’ll always choose this. With you. As long as you’ll let me.”

Remus ducks his head, eyes looking up through his lashes, driving Sirius mad. “But...”

“But?” Sirius tugs on his arm again, causing Remus to fall forward, bracing himself with one hand on either side of Sirius’s head.

Remus searches his face for a moment, worrying his bottom lip.

“But?” Sirius prods again.

Remus lowers his face a little further down, floppy golden hair brushing Sirius’s forehead. “But you’re not gay,” he says weakly, causing Sirius’s stomach to clench.

“Oh,” he manages eventually.

“Yeah,” Remus doesn’t move, staying right where he is, inches away.

Sirius swallows, forcing himself not to look away, unsure how to explain all the tangled parts of himself. “I—“ he starts then stops, letting out a shaky breath. “My Uncle Alphard was gay,” he says finally, which is probably a strange place to start but Remus just nods.

“Okay,” he says, brushing his nose against Sirius’s. “I didn’t know that. Did he tell you?”

Sirius nods his head jerkily, wondering if Remus can feel him shaking. “He wasn’t really... my mum didn’t burn him off the wall like she did with me but he—they all treated him terribly. His parents pretended they didn’t even have a son. I mean we always knew about him growing up, but...”

“Because he was gay?” Remus asks.

Sirius grimaces. “Yeah. I mean, no one ever told me so but...yeah,” he swallows with difficulty. “Alphard said—he said his dad threatened him. Said if he ever did anything, you know, publicly. Had any kind of, relationship I guess, that he’d kill him.”

“Jesus Christ,” Remus hisses.

“Yeah,” Sirius says, wishing his voice was a little more stable. “So he never did.”

Remus blinks. “He never had a relationship?”

Sirius shakes his head. “At least not one that was...you know...”

“Out?” Remus supplies for him.

“Yeah,” his mouth feels dry. “Not that it mattered, they killed him anyway.” His voice breaks then and he has to use every ounce of his self control he has to keep the prickling behind his eyes from turning into tears.

“Oh Sirius,” Remus kisses his forehead, his nose, his eyelids. They’re soft and caring and Sirius lets himself relax into them, lets himself breathe.

“I choose you,” Sirius says, as steadily as he can, barely able to get the next words out of his mouth. “But I’m afraid of that...word. Of being. That. Of what it means.”

“What does it mean?” Remus asks, brushing the hair off his forehead.

Sirius can’t look at him anymore, eyes closing. “That I’m broken.” His voice trembles, paper thin and barely holding it together. “That I’m...sick.”

He hears the hitch in Remus’s breath.

“I’m sorry,” Sirius says, even though he isn’t sure what he’s apologizing for.

“Sirius,” Remus murmurs, dropping his face into the crook of Sirius’s neck. They sit like that for a while before Remus eventually pulls back, looking sad, his hand going to Sirius’s face, cupping his cheek.

“Sirius,” he says again. “You aren’t broken.”

He isn’t quite ready for the way those words ripple through him. The way they shake his bones. He tries to stop them, but the tears sneak out anyway, Remus brushing them away with his thumb.

“I know it’s stupid,” Sirius says thickly. “I don’t give a fuck what any of them think anyway, I don’t know why this—this matters. It shouldn’t make a difference, what they said. What they thought. I don’t want to be someone they would like.”

Remus just keeps wiping the tears off his face. “They’re your family,” he says softly. “You’re allowed to be hurt by what they’ve said. It’s kind of impossible not to be. No matter how hard we wish it wasn’t.”

Sirius breathes in, pressing his cheek into Remus’s hand. “I really fucking love you, you know?” he says, with as much conviction as he can muster. “I know I’m a mess but I—that’s never gonna change okay?”

Remus’s lower lip wobbles. “Yeah,” he breathes. “Yeah me too.”

They kiss again, it’s soft and tender and purposeless. Remus holds him and Sirius lets him, lets himself be taken care of. Loved. Worshipped. With gentle hands that don’t want anything, but to make him feel good. And arms that keep him safe. If he could make a home out Remus’s body he would.

They fall asleep tangled up together on the floor. Sirius is awake before the sun, his body stiff. It’s with great care that he extracts himself from Remus, conjuring a blanket to take his place, wrapping it around Remus, tucking him in. They never sleep on the mattress. It’s filthy but Sirius doesn’t think that’s the reason. It’s too close to the full moon for Remus. Too close to Moony.

Sirius watches him for a moment, the peaceful expression on his face, lips slightly parted, hair mussed. He bends down and kisses the top of his head.

“Okay,” he whispers, kissing him once more for good measure. “You win.”

He leaves the Shack a few minutes later, making his way through the passage and back onto school grounds. The sky is only just beginning to warm by the time he gets there. It must be nearing 7:30 as he walks towards the Quidditch pitch, the distant specs of the Gryffindor team clear in the sky. Watching them makes him miss something he can’t quite name. I mean, he misses playing beside them but it’s more than that. He misses the way things were back then. The days when him and James would wake when it was still dark out and drag themselves down the hill. Most mornings they barely talked, but they were always together. On the ground, in the air.

Sirius leans against the entrance to the pitch, watching the practice come to an end, players standing around in a circle. There’s some laughter, James is speaking but he’s too far away for Sirius to hear. He wonders what James’s speeches are like, if he tries to mimic Frank or if he’s found his own style already. The sky is pink now, glowing bright over the still half-frozen campus.

Eventually the group breaks up, Mary lingering to talk to James. Sirius stays where he is until they start walking towards the change rooms, then he places his fingers in his mouth and whistles. James’s head instantly snaps towards him, though it’s a few seconds before he recognizes Sirius. It’s easy to see the moment that it happens—James’s whole body going rigid. Mary is looking too but James tells her to go—or at least Sirius assumes he does, he still can’t hear but he watches James say something to her and after a few reluctant moments

Mary continues on her way towards the change rooms and James starts walking towards Sirius.

“Hi,” James says once he’s in earshot, looking almost as nervous as he sounds. There are bags under his eyes, his skin pale, and hair more a mess than normal. Sirius doesn’t speak, just nods his heads towards the stands and starts up the stairs. He doesn’t need to check behind him. He knows James is following.

When they reach the top the cold wind whips Sirius’s hair back from his face, the sunrise bright in front of them. Sirius walks all the way to the railing, looking out over the field, overly sensitive to the sounds of James behind him.

“Is this the part where you kill me then?” James asks finally. “The locations not exactly subtle but I guess you always did love to put on a show.”

Sirius has never been very good at controlling his anger. Even now, after he’s had days to think. To come to terms with...everything. There’s still a part of him that’s ready to snap. James is joking about the murder, but it scares Sirius how close to the truth he is. How part of Sirius wants to get his hands on James and squeeze and squeeze and never stop. Wants to break James for making him feel like this. Like he’s alone again. Or worse. Like maybe he was alone the whole time.

James sighs. “Sirius?”

“I hate you so much right now,” he says before he can stop himself, eyes focused on the horizon. If he doesn’t look at James maybe he’ll be able to keep it together.

“I know,” Sirius isn’t sure he’s ever heard James sound so small. “I’m sorry.”

“Not sorry enough not to fuck my brother though, yeah?” Sirius means it to be harsh. To be mean. But he doesn’t quite expect to feel himself flinching away from his own words.

“Sirius—“

“Not sorry enough to tell the truth either.”

James lets out a frustrated noise. “I know okay? I know. I fucked up. It’s all...fucked up. I get that it probably doesn’t matter but I never meant for any of it to happen.”

Sirius snorts. “You’re right, it doesn’t matter.”

“I would never hurt you on purpose Sirius.”

“What do you mean on purpose?” he demands, rage slowly building up inside of him. “This wasn’t an accident—it didn’t happen to you, you did it.”

“I know—“

“You lied on purpose. You made Remus lie to me on purpose—and God fuck you for that one by the way. As if being betrayed by you wasn’t enough you really had to go and twist the

knife in didn't you?"

"It wasn't Remus's fault—" James starts, but Sirius swiftly cuts him off.

"Did you hold a wand to his head? Threaten to Avada him if he told me the truth?"

"I just mean—"

"He did it on purpose too," those words still feel like swallowing broken glass. "You asked but he agreed."

There's another stretch of silence, filled by the noise of the wind rattling in the naked trees. Without leaves the forbidden forest looks like it's made out of a thousand bony hands, all reaching towards the sky.

"I really am sorry," James says finally, voice nearly lost in the empty space surrounding them.

"Are you?" Sirius asks coldly. They aren't here because James finally decided to be honest, because he realized that what he was doing was messed up, they're here because of a mistake. A misspoken word. And Sirius has no doubt that if that mistake hadn't been made James would never have told him the truth.

"I'm sorry that I lied," James says finally. "I'm sorry that I hurt you. But—" his voice cuts out and he has to clear his throat. "But I'm not sorry that I love him. That I love Regulus."

Sirius imagines what it would feel like to drive his fist into James's face. The satisfaction of feeling the cartilage in his nose crunch. Of doing it again and again and again. He doesn't do it, of course. But it's a near thing.

"Well, if you love him I guess it's all peaches then."

"That's not what I'm saying."

"No?" Sirius asks coldly. "What the hell are you saying then?"

"I'm saying—" he makes a frustrated noise. "I'm saying—can't I love you both?"

No!

Sirius almost shouts. Almost stamps his foot. Balls up his fists.

No. No. No.

You're mine.

You were supposed to be mine.

"If the past year has shown us anything it's that you can do whatever the fuck you like Potter."

He hears the sound of James collapsing into one of the seats behind him. The sky is getting brighter and Sirius wonders if Remus is awake, if he's already in the Great Hall with Peter. If he'll realize, when James doesn't show up, what Sirius left so early this morning to do.

"I'm trying here Sirius," James says eventually, sounding exhausted.

"You aren't actually," Sirius says bitterly. "We're only here because of Remus."

"I wanted to tell you."

"But you didn't."

There's a beat of silence.

"He didn't want me to."

Sirius laughs coldly. "Of course he didn't. And what Regulus wants Regulus gets, right?" Isn't that how it's always been?

Regulus, the good son.

The better son.

"He was scared Sirius—he's still scared. He doesn't want to do anything to make you angrier at him. He really cares about—"

Sirius turns around for the first time, it's a sharp movement, his entire body vibrating with barely contained anger. "I'm gonna need you to shut up now."

James doesn't argue, mouth closing immediately as his hands come up in surrender.

It's a few seconds before Sirius is sure that when he opens his mouth actual words are going to come out and not just profanities. "I don't have a clue what the hell goes on between the pair of you, I don't really think I could stomach hearing about it. But Regulus is loyal to himself and himself only. I would have thought that you of all people would understand that but I guess not."

James only shakes his head. "He isn't—I'm not sure you know him as well as you think." Clearly seeing the outburst building behind Sirius's closed lips James presses on quickly. "I think there's a lot you've hidden from each other over the years. Being in that house—you've both been hurt, but if you would just talk..." James trails off, looking at Sirius desperately. Hopefully. It almost makes Sirius feel sorry for him.

"You don't think I know him?" Sirius repeats slowly, dangerously.

James rolls his eyes. "Did you hear anything else I said?"

"Yeah, I heard it. We're both fucked up. If only we would spill our guts to one another maybe we could be a big happy family."

“I mean, I liked my wording better but...”

“The problem is,” Sirius goes on, voice pulled tight, sun now almost completely risen behind him. “You can’t tell Regulus anything. He has about a dozen different faces and you never know which one you’re talking to. The only thing you can know for certain is that you can’t trust any of them.”

“I’m telling you, he’s not like that. I promise,” James is holding his hands out beseechingly.

Sirius just arches his brow. “Because you know my brother so much better do you? Because he’s honest with you?”

He sees the small flicker of doubt in James’s eyes.

“I know him,” he says instead of answering. “I know the kind of person he is. When it comes down to it, I know that he has it in him to be good.”

Sirius nods slowly. “Good,” the word is brittle in his mouth, prone to cracking apart. “You’ve seen my brother’s true heart and it is good?”

“Yes,” James says adamantly.

The wind whistles through the stands. It sounds like a ghost. Maybe it is.

“And how exactly,” Sirius sharpens every word on his tongue before spitting it out, “does the Mark on his arm play into that?”

The stillness that comes over James is violent. Sirius feels it like hands pressing against his chest. Several emotions flash across James’s face in a matter of seconds—shock, anger, sadness—but it’s fear that sticks in the end. James stares back at Sirius looking absolutely terrified.

“What are you talking about?” he finally whispers.

For the first time Sirius’s anger fades a bit. There is something delicate about his best friend all of the sudden.

“So you don’t know?”

“Sirius,” the name barely makes it out of James’s mouth, eyes wide and pleading. This truth is an axe, Sirius realizes, and once it’s told something will be irrevocably severed.

“The Mark. Voldemort’s Mark. He’s taken it.”

“No,” James says. Scared. So. So. Scared. At first Sirius thinks James is shaking his head but then he realizes that James is just...shaking. “No. There’s no way. How do you know? How could you possibly know that when I don’t?”

Sirius is familiar with this moment.

Knows what it's like to love Regulus. To trust him.

Knows how it feels when you realize what a mistake you've made.

"I've seen it."

A wounded noise escapes James's throat. "No. No he can't. I would know. You said—you said you had to choose it. You told me you had to accept the Mark."

"Yeah," Sirius nearly winces at the pain in James's voice. "You do."

"But he wouldn't!" James says desperately, voice cracking. "He wouldn't. I know that he's made mistakes. I know that. Terrible mistakes. But he's—he's really not—he's not like that. He's not like them. I promise. I swear. He wouldn't."

"James—"

"I know he hurt you," James rambles on, like this is a problem you can talk yourself out of. "I hate that he did that, but he was just a kid and he didn't know what to do. He's so fucking sorry Sirius—I couldn't be with someone who could hurt you without being sorry about it. You have to know that. You have to know that I couldn't be with someone who would—who was anything like—he's so lovely," James finishes weakly, pressing the heels of his hands into his eyes.

"I love him. I'm sorry. I know that hurts you. I'm sorry. The last thing I ever wanted to do was lie to you. But I love him. So I can't believe that he would—I just can't believe that. I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry."

He's crying.

Sirius is well acquainted with what James's voice sounds like when he cries. Choked and thin. It's a sound that could call Sirius from a mile away—tell him he was needed. That someone was going to die because, as far as he's concerned, no one makes James Potter cry and gets away with it.

"Fuck James," he mutters under his breath, no longer able to stay away. He takes the seat next to him, wrapping his arm around James's shoulders and pulling him into his side.

"I don't know what to do," James hiccups. "I don't know what to do. I don't know what to do. This is too...fucking much. It's too—no one ever taught me how to handle this shit. I love him so much and I'm so sorry."

"Shh, shh," Sirius exhales, hand rubbing up and down James's arm. "We'll figure it out," he says, because what else is there? "We always do."

There's a moment of silence, broken up by James's sniffing.

"We—us—we will?" he finally asks, face still buried in Sirius's shoulder.

"Yeah, us."

Another pause. And then, in the smallest voice;

“I really fucking missed you Sirius.”

Sirius squeezes him tightly. “Well just for the record, I didn’t miss you at all.”

James gives him a watery laugh and Sirius counts it as a win.

PART III MARY

Mary sits in a window near the back of the school. There are no classrooms here, just storage cupboards and a few offices further down. She watches the corner up ahead, fiddling with the cigarette between her fingers. Its a loophole, being able to smoke at Hogwarts. Since Wizards don’t have cigarettes there are no rules against them in the school. She should probably be more careful if she doesn’t want that to change but then, she rather likes the idea of forcing the creation of a new school rule. She’d wear it like a badge of honour. Make James and Sirius jealous.

She inhales deeply, letting the smoke sit in her lungs until it starts to sting and then tilting her head back and exhaling. Shockingly, Regulus Black has turned out to be a snake of his word. Giving her his friends’ schedules and alerting her whenever they leave the common room. As a result, she’s spent the past few days following them around, figuring out where they go and how they get there and who they’re with. All in all it’s been a very educational, if not dull, few days.

For instance, she’s learned that on Wednesdays Barty Crouch Junior takes a detour on his way back from his last period class so he can hook up with Delany Whispers—a fourth year Ravenclaw. Honestly, you’d think a Ravenclaw would have more sense, but Mary supposes they’re not exactly a house known for their good taste.

She stubs out her cigarette when she hears footsteps approaching but otherwise stays where she is, wand sliding into her hand. Barty Crouch is a boy of average height and looks. A bit thin and peaky for Mary’s taste but she supposes that’s to be expected after years of in-breeding. He doesn’t notice her when he rounds the corner or when he struts past her on his way to get his rocks off. Clearly someone’s feeling desperate.

“Hey Crouch?”

Hey Macdonald?

Barty freezes down the hall, turning to find her walking towards him. There is nothing hurried about Mary’s steps. They echo confidently in the empty corridor. Crouch looking instantly suspicious.

“What the hell do you want?”

Get lost creep.

“Aw, come on, don’t be like that,” she tilts her head to the side. A predator assessing her prey. “I came to apologize.”

Aw, come on, don’t be like that. Listen, I came to apologize.

There’s a new tension to Barty’s stance as she stops in front of him, his eyes bouncing nervously around like he’s afraid something is going to jump out at him. “What?” he demands harshly, screwing up his face. “What are—what the fuck are you playing at?” he doesn’t quite manage to keep the fear out of his voice.

She only smiles. Red lips pulling up to reveal two pearly-white rows of teeth. “Come on Barty, you remember don’t you? It happened just like this,” she gestures at the space around them. “I was on my way back to my dorm and then there you were. Calling my name. Though you’ll have to tell me the rest,” she leans towards the terrified looking boy, mock-whispering. “Between you and me, it all goes a bit fuzzy after that.”

Barty instantly takes a step back. “Listen, I don’t know what you think—“

But she isn’t interested in his denial. Or his threats. Or disarming the wand he is pathetically attempting to pull from his bag.

“Imperio.”

Instantly his whole body relaxes, face going slack, eyes unfocused, Mary’s mind suddenly controlling them both. “I’m going to let you keep that memory,” she says, stepping nearer, eyes running over her hostage. “So that when you wake up you’ll know it was me who did this to you,” she drags the tip of her wand down the side of his face.

“And you’ll know why.”

PART IV BARTY

It’s. Fucking. Cold.

He groans, reaching for his blanket.

Cold. And...prickly?

His hand is groping around for his comforter but something doesn’t feel right. His bed is... off. Everything is off. And Christ why the fuck is it so cold? He forces his eyes open, blinking against the light, waiting for the room to come into focus.

Except there is no room.

Barty sits bolt upright, head swimming for a minute as he tries to wake himself up. Because clearly he's still asleep. Clearly this is a nightmare. And yet, regardless of how many times he pinches or slaps himself, nothing changes. He continues to be sitting in the dirt, dark trunks sprouting from the ground around him and stretching far over his head, cutting up the sunlight so that it's hard for him to tell what time of day it is.

Something in the distance howls.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck," Barty scrambles to his feet, scrapping his hand open on something sharp in the process. "FUCK," he puts extra emphasis on that last one as he goes to wipe the blood off on his trousers.

Except he isn't wearing trousers.

He's stood in the middle of, what he has to assume is the Forbidden—Goddamn—Forest, in nothing but his pants.

His heart is starting to pound against his ribs and he begs himself to remember what the hell happened, hands searching fruitlessly for his wand even though he already knows he doesn't have it. A twig snaps behind him and he jumps, spinning around and stumbling backwards, nearly landing back on his ass in the dirt.

"Merlin," he hisses, staring into the dark shadows between the trees. There's another noise, definitely footsteps. Something is coming.

"H-hello?"

He wracks his brain for every 'Care for Magical Creatures' class he's ever taken. What even lives in the Forbidden Forest? He makes another desperate search for his wand, but he doesn't see it on the ground and it sure as hell isn't in his boxers. A cold wind blows through the trees then, they rattle above him, his teeth starting to chatter.

He tries to orient himself, looking around, figuring out which way to go. But all he sees are trees. Trees and shadows and thousands of places for scary things to hide.

That's when he hears something growl.

Barty doesn't bother trying to figure out what made the noise or how far away it is. He takes off sprinting in the opposite direction, praying to Merlin and Salazar and every other great Wizard he can think of that he's heading towards the school and not deeper into the forest.

Trees and shrubbery shred his skin as he blows threw them, heart beating faster than it ever has before. Something flutters its wing over his head. He thinks he feels something scaly brush against his leg.

"Fuck," he whimpers, trying to make himself go faster. "Oh fuck, oh fuck, oh fuck." He keeps waiting to wake up. This has to be a dream. It has to be. I mean, why the hell would he be in the Forbidden Forest half-naked, it doesn't make any—

He's hit with the blurry images of a memory.

Of Mary Macdonald in a hallway.

Of her voice in his ear.

I'm going to let you keep that memory. So that when you wake up you'll know it was me who did this to you. And you'll know why.

He almost cries.

"Oh fuck, oh fuck, oh fuck."

Eventually he realizes that nothing is actually chasing him so he lets himself slow down, wandering aimlessly until he finds a tree he can climb. From up above he's able to locate the castle a good forty minute walk to the west of him.

Fucking brilliant.

By the time he manages to get back to school he's cut up and freezing cold and covered in dirt. People stare as he walks through the front foyer in his goddamn boxers. He gets a few gasps, but most people laugh. The assholes. He's going to skin all of them alive the minute he gets his bloody wand back.

Given how absolutely absurd his morning has been he shouldn't be surprised by the mess awaiting him in his dorm room and yet...

"Holy shit, I thought I looked bad," Evan laughs when Barty walks in. Evan is sitting on the end of his bed, shirt off, a pair of track pants on his lower half, Regulus healing some scrapes on his chest. It takes a few seconds of staring at Evan's disheveled appearance before Barty realizes what it means.

"I—you—you were there too?" he asks numbly.

"If by 'there' you mean the—fuck me Reg" Evan hisses as Regulus heals a particularly nasty cut on his ribs. Apparently whatever spell he's using stings.

"Sorry," Regulus mutters, though he doesn't sound remotely sorry.

"If by 'there' I mean what Evan?" Barty demands impatiently, Evan can never stay on topic, even in moments like this.

"The fucking forest of terrors," Evan grimaces as Regulus moves on to another cut. "Yeah I was there. So were Snape, Mulciber, and Avery."

"What??"

Regulus steps back, sliding his wand into the holster on his arm. "There, that should be most of the bad stuff."

“We’re you all together?” Barty demands, ignoring Regulus.

“Nah,” Evan groans as he reaches across his bed for his t-shirt, sliding it carefully over his freshly cleaned torso. “Just got back quicker than you,” he gives Barty a wink, like this is all some fucking joke.

“It was Macdonald.”

“Yeah,” Evan groans again when he stands. “We’re aware. Not exactly subtle that one, is she?” he sounds almost impressed, which makes Barty want to throttle him.

“So what’re we going to do about the bitch?”

“Nothing,” Regulus says coldly, bringing Barty’s attention back to him. He’s shorter than both him and Evan and yet somehow he can do this thing with his eyes where he makes you feel two feet tall.

“Sit down and let me take care of your face,” he goes on before Barty can argue. “You can’t go to class like that.”

Barty has no idea what’s wrong with his face, though he’s fairly certain he got bitten at some point—either during the night or his mad rush through the forest. The flesh near his eyes is itchy and swollen and, of course, he’s cut up too. Superficial cuts, but still. Oh, and there’s the mud. Who knew forests were so fucking filthy?

Grumbling Barty sits down on the bed in front of Reg, letting him inspect his face. “Evan, Snape, Mulciber, Avery, me, but not you?”

“Not me,” Regulus confirms in a bored tone.

“Why the hell is that?”

“He wasn’t there,” Evan is leaning against the bedpost next to them.

“What do you mean he wasn’t there?” Barty demands. “He’s the one who wiped her bloody memories.”

When neither of them respond he shakes his head.

“Hold still,” Regulus murmurs.

“We can’t just let her get away with this?” he blusters on. “She left us naked in the fucking woods. She took my wand!” which, now that he thinks about it...

As though he can read Barty’s mind Regulus says; “On your bed. Along with your clothes. She even folded them.”

For some reason that makes Barty angrier. “That Mudblood is gonna fucking regret this.”

Reg only rolls his eyes. “This is getting repetitive now. Try to come up with some new material Barty.” Barty opens his mouth to snap back but Regulus doesn’t give him the chance. “I’m gonna cast a cleaning charm first, get some of this mud off you, see what we’re really working with, okay?”

Barty glares petulantly back at him. “Fine.”

“So gracious,” Regulus says flatly before waving his wand and causing a cold wave to wash over Barty. It’s not as good as old fashioned soap and water but it still feels nice, having the dirt lifted from his skin. Makes him feel more like himself.

“What’s that on your face?” Evan tilts his head, looking down at Barty in confusion. That wouldn’t be so worrying—since Evan is often confused—except that Regulus is looking at him with the same expression.

“What?” he demands, eyes bouncing between the pair of them. “What the fuck is on my face?”

“It looks like—“ and then Evan starts to laugh. “Oh my god, priceless.”

“WHAT!” Thoroughly at his wit’s end he pushes past his friends and into the bathroom, hands grabbing either side of the sink as he stares into the mirror. He looks a mess—his face cut up, hair tangled, but none of that is what Evan is talking about.

“What the fuck,” he mutters, turning on the tap and aggressively scrubbing at the bright red lipstick mark on his cheek. “That psychopath. I swear to Merlin I am gonna end her.” When water doesn’t do anything on its own Barty reaches for the soap, lathering his face up before rinsing. But when he dries his face off afterwards the mark is still there, pristine as before. Not even smudged.

Barty squints at it in the mirror before starting the whole process over again. Scrubbing and rinsing, scrubbing and rinsing, scrubbing and rinsing. By the fourth or fifth time the skin of his cheek is red and angry but the lips are still there, taunting him. For some reason the sight of them causes a panic to flutter in Barty’s chest. What if she did something to him? What if they’re permanent? What if he never gets them off?

“What the fuck,” he repeats, ready to take his nails to it before Regulus appears behind him, grabbing hold of his wrist.

“Wait,” he says, lifting his wand and casting a quick diagnostic charm that Barty barely recognizes. Reg frowns for a minute before dropping his wand. “It’s magic.”

“No shit,” Barty snaps. “But how the hell do I get it off!”

Regulus only shakes his head. “I don’t know—but your nails aren’t going to do it so don’t go fucking up your face anymore than you already have. You’ll just have to...wait for it to fade.”

Before Barty can fully grasp the absolutely absurdity of that, Evan appears behind him in the bathroom mirror, taking one look at Barty's red marked face and bursting out laughing again.

"Not helping Evan," Regulus says, sounding weary, but Evan isn't cowed.

"Dude," he says, when he finally regains some manner of control over himself. "She's fucking branded you."

Because he's standing in front of the mirror Barty has the privilege of watching his own eyes widen in horror. Evan might be an idiot but he is also, infuriatingly, right. That is exactly what she's done.

He turns to Reg. "Get it off."

Regulus looks back at him with the same bored expression he almost always wears. "I told you, I can't. You'll just have to wait for it to fade." With that he heads back into the main room, getting his books for class.

"I can't wait for it to fade," Barty snarls, following after Regulus with a delighted Evan on his heels.

"Well then, by all means," Regulus slides the strap of his book bag across his chest. "Carve it off your face," his grey eyes run Barty up and down. "You never know, a scar might give you some character."

"Fuck you Regulus."

But Reg doesn't respond, walking out the door without a backwards glance.

"Prick," Barty hisses, running a hand through his hair and wincing as the salt of his sweat stings some of the cuts on his hands.

"You reckon she got frisky with you before she dumped you in the forest?" Evan asks, leaning in to inspect the mark on Barty's cheek again.

Barty growls shoving him off, which, predictably, only makes Evan laugh.

"Don't be disgusting."

"I don't know," Evan shrugs, grabbing his own bag. "Macdonald's pretty hot."

"She's a filthy Mudblood and a fucking psychotic bitch on top of that, what the hell is wrong with you?" Barty can hear the slightly hysterical edge creeping into his voice but he's too far gone to care at this point.

Besides, Evan only blinks back at him. "Still hot." And then, at Barty's growl of frustration, he claps him on the shoulder. "C'mon dude, we gotta go. It's not that bad. Just play it off as a good night."

Barty isn't even going to touch that.

“What am I supposed to do about these,” he gestures to the mess of cuts on his torso. “The forest turned me into a bloody pincushion.”

Evan grimaces. “Oooh, sorry mate, healing spells really aren’t my thing. That’s all Reg,” after a moment of silence in which Barty seriously considers murdering Evan, the other boy gives his shoulder another squeeze. “Well, see you in class?”

“You’re a shit friend Evan.”

The other boy only laughs. “Takes one to know one. Plus, if I’m late again Sprout will give me detention which is pretty high on my list of things I don’t want.”

“Absolute shit.”

Evan only waves at him over his shoulder, whistling as he walks out the door. You would never know that only a few hours ago he’d been cursed and then dumped in a deadly forest half-naked.

Barty tries and fails to fix his own wounds, eventually giving up on healing spells and on going to class. He finds himself, still nearly naked, standing back in front of the bathroom mirror, unable to take his eyes off of the garish lipstick on his cheek.

She put her mouth on him.

The very thought sends a wave of nausea radiating through his whole body. The worst part is, she wanted this. Planned this. Wanted him to be embarrassed. Made a fool of. The faces of the students he’d passed on his way back to the dorm this morning fill his mind. The snickering and staring. And there will surely be more once people see his cheek.

Barty is not a fucking joke.

He is not an embarrassment.

And he most certainly isn’t some Mudblood slut’s play thing.

His fingers curl around the sink, eyes wild with rage.

He’ll show her.

Show all of them.

His father.

Show them the kind of beast he can be.

Hey-o !!!

Mary. Does. Not. Play.

I also love that when Regulus is written from James's perspective it's all "sweet angel baby, love of my life, a cinnamon roll" but when he's written from anyone else's perspective it's all "what a stone cold bitch"

ANYWAY love you all, thank you for sticking with me, we're getting closer to the end-ish (I mean ISH there's still a bit to go but we're definitely more than halfway there) your comments and kudos are much appreciated!

Chapter 39

Chapter Summary

I hate this too.

Chapter Notes

TW Cancer

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

PART I LILY

Lily doesn't let herself get her hopes up when she's told that McGonagall wants to see her in her office. Doesn't let herself think, even for a second, about what it might mean. About why she's being summoned. Even after McGonagall tells her, after she leaves Lily alone, kneeling in front of the fireplace, she doesn't quite let herself believe it. That she's actually going to get to see her mum. Now. Today. Here. Doesn't believe it until the moment her face appears in the flames.

"Mum!" Lily nearly reaches into the fire. "Oh my God, Mum, hi, hello, can you hear me?" she laughs a little, instantly feeling some of the tension she's been carrying around for the past few weeks lessen just at the sight of her mum's face.

She's okay,

Lily tells herself.

Look at her, she's okay.

"Hi, Lily? Darling? Goodness," her mum laughs too. "I'll never get used to this."

"No," Lily agrees, "me neither." She really wishes she could hug her. Her mum gives the best hugs. "Where are you?" Lily asks instead.

"Um...neighbours house, a few blocks down," she gives Lily a cheeky smile, lowering her voice. "Turns out they're magic too."

Lily smiles back. "Imagine that."

“Ministry came by, asked them if they’d let me use their fireplace—I don’t know what the Wizards call it—“

“The Floo mum, it’s the Floo. Well, the Floo Network.”

Her mother arches her brow. “The Flu? Really? Sounds like an illness.”

“Yeah, actually, you’re right. I never thought about it.”

“Well, anyway, I’ve kicked the poor people out of their living room so I suppose we should keep this short. What’s going on darling? Why did you need to speak with me so badly?”

Suddenly Lily feels incredibly silly. How exactly is she meant to explain that she’s done all this just because of a feeling in her gut that something wasn’t...right?

“I just—“ she starts then stops, sighing as she crosses her legs and sits more comfortably on the stone floor. “I was worried I guess.”

Which is when she sees it.

The tension in the corner of her mum’s eyes.

“Worried?” she asks, her voice ticking up. “About what?”

Lily’s stomach starts to squirm, the same unease she felt reading her mum’s letters coming back.

“Mum?” she asks. “What is it? What’s going on?” She has no idea what could be wrong. She just knows something is. Something her mother doesn’t want her to know. That she thinks she needs protecting from.

“Did something happen to Petunia?”

“No, no, of course not!” her mother gives a bit of a breathless laugh, eyes not quite meeting Lily’s. “She’s fine, we’re both fine.”

But Lily only shakes her head. She is an expert in her mother’s “fines.” She’s heard this one before. Heard it a hundred times when she stood next to her mum as people asked her how she was after her father’s death. Listened to her tell everyone who came by to drop off casseroles and flowers in the months that followed that she was “fine.”

“Please,” she says, not willing to play this game. “Don’t do this, just tell me what’s wrong yeah? I can’t bear being the last one to find out again.”

She can see her mother’s struggle even through the fire. See her trying and failing to keep the polite smile on her face.

“Oh Lily,” she says finally, letting out a deep breath. “I don’t want to worry you, it isn’t—it really isn’t—“ her voice cuts out and she looks away for a moment, hand going

absentmindedly to the chain around her neck that her wedding ring hangs on. “It’s not worth stressing over.”

“Okay,” Lily says slowly, wishing her stomach would stop feeling like it was trying to squeeze itself out of existence. “Well, if you tell me I promise not to stress about it.”

Her mother gives her a wry smile, though it doesn’t quite reach her eyes. “I’m not sure either of us believes that.”

“I already know something’s up mum,” she pushes. “I can feel it. I can feel you hiding something from me and it’s driving me mad. I’m not a little kid, you can’t keep me in the dark. It’s not...helpful.”

She can see her mother accept the truth of what she’s saying.

So she waits.

Waits for her to open her mouth again.

Waits for the other shoe to drop.

Whatever it is, she can handle it. She knows she can. If she just knows what they’re up against she’ll be able to find a way to deal with it. To fight it. It’s the not knowing that’s the problem—like having her hands tied behind her back. Once she’s free she’ll be able to find a solution for whatever it is.

“I went to the doctor after you left for school,” Lily just nods, not letting her thoughts run away down the dark hole they so desperately want to. Her mother kisses her teeth. “I have—they found a tumour.”

Lily blinks. “A tumour?”

“Yes.”

“Where?”

Her mother sighs, rubbing the space between her eyes. “My liver.”

Lily nods again, like she has any idea what that means. She’s not even sure why she bothered asking “where” when she doesn’t know anything about tumours. But the liver seems fairly harmless doesn’t it? What does your liver even do? It’s not like a brain or a heart or a lung, right? It can’t be that bad.

“Okay,” Lily says eventually, when her mother doesn’t go on. “And did they—have they done—tests or—because all tumours aren’t cancer right? I definitely feel like I’ve read that somewhere. Some are just...lumps.”

Her mother gives her a weak smile. “Yes, some are just lumps,” and then, “but not this one.”

“Oh.”

Oh.

For a moment Lily's brain seems to stall. It doesn't have any thoughts or feelings. Like everything in her has suddenly gone blank.

Oh.

Oh.

Oh.

"Lily?"

And then it starts up again. Going a thousand miles an hour.

"Alright, that's alright. People fight cancer all the time. There are treatments. Are you being treated? How long ago did you find this out? Have you told Petunia? I also think you're supposed to start eating a certain way—like super healthy or whatever—and drink water. I mean, I know that drinking water doesn't cure cancer but I bet it probably helps. What kind of treatment are you getting? What do the doctors say? What's their plan? Are they good doctors? Do we need to get you better doctors? How do you even get better doctors, like where do you go, is there a directory or something? Actually, you don't worry about that, I'll talk to Petunia she'll know. You just need to rest and eat healthy food and drink water and—"

"Lily, Lily darling stop. Breathe. You need to breathe."

"I am breathing."

"Lily."

She takes in a big gulp of air just to prove to her mum that she is breathing. Except once she starts she can't stop, panting like she's just run a mile. So maybe she doesn't have the breathing thing quite as under control as she thought.

"It's going to be okay," her mother says soothingly, eyes brimming with concern, which isn't right at all. She's the one with the cancer. She's the one who they need to be concerned about.

"I know it will be," Lily says when she can speak again. "Because you're going to get treated and then you're going to get better. Right?"

There's a pause. Not a long one. But longer than Lily would like.

"Yes," her mother says eventually. "I'm being treated, it'll help."

"Help?" Lily demands, thankful it's her hands that are trembling and not her voice.

Her mother gives her another one of those looks, like Lily's the sick one.

"Liver cancer is very...serious," she says delicately.

“What does that mean mum?” Lily asks, her head buzzing as she tries to keep herself in check. If she breaks down her mum will never tell her anything important ever again.

“It just means that there is a chance I might not...”

She doesn't finish that sentence.

Lily is grateful.

She's almost certain she couldn't bear hearing it.

“No,” the word is out of her mouth before she can think better of it. “That's not going to happen.”

“Lily—“

“It's not going to happen.”

Her mother stares at her for a moment, eyes going soft. “Okay,” she nearly whispers. “Okay darling.”

For some mad reason her mum tries to make small talk after that. Tries to tell Lily about Petunia's garden and her new lawnmower that practically does all the work itself and some casserole recipe she really likes. By the time they say goodbye Lily is just about ready to explode with all the feelings trapped inside her. All the fear and confusion and helplessness. There are still months before she goes home for the summer and suddenly that feels unbearable.

She's still sitting on the floor when McGonagall knocks on the door nearly twenty minutes later.

She's meant to go to class but she doesn't. The thought never even crosses her mind. Instead she heads straight for the infirmary. Wizards don't get sick like Muggles, Lily knows that much. Knows they have spells and potions that Muggles can't even dream of. She still remembers the day that Marlene told her and Mary that she's never had the flu.

She knows that she should probably take a moment to compose herself, that her head's a mess. Her chest. She has no idea what she's actually feeling. She wishes she could ask her mother's doctors questions. Wishes she could take her to her appointments. Wishes she could be there for once.

This is just another thing Petunia will hold against me, she can't help but think.

Everything in her is so muddled she hasn't even had time to be angry that her mother was hiding this from her. Was she ever going to tell Lily? I mean, what the hell was she waiting for? She said herself that it's serious and she was—what? Just going to keep lying to Lily until she couldn't anymore? Until she was in the hospital or dead?

Even thinking that word sends a shock of fear through her. Her mother is not going to die. It isn't possible, the universe just doesn't work like that, it isn't that cruel. It won't take both her parents. Not when she still needs them so badly. When she still feels like such a kid.

"Miss Evans?"

Lily's head snaps up to find a confused Madam Pomfrey walking towards her. It seems she's stormed into the infirmary without realizing it.

"Are you alright?" the older woman asks as she stops in front of her.

"Er—yes, or, no. But I—can I speak with you?" she asks, feeling jittery and shaky and very much like she might be sick.

"Of course," Pomfrey gestures her towards her office.

"My mother," Lily says as soon as the door closes behind them. "She's ill and I was wondering if you could help?"

Pomfrey looks confused for about a second before she recovers. "Your mother?" she repeats, leaning against the front of her desk, facing Lily. "She's a Muggle, yes?"

Lily nods. "She's got cancer—I don't know if Wizards get cancer?"
Pomfrey shakes her head. "No," she says gently, "they don't."

"Good," though the look on Pomfrey's face seems to suggest otherwise. "That means you have a cure for it right? Or some way to prevent it?"

Pomfrey is eyeing her with a pity that Lily doesn't appreciate. "Miss Evans, it seems to me that this is going in an unfortunate direction—I cannot treat your mother," she says, not unkindly.

Lily doesn't even blink. "No, that's okay. I can take her to the hospital in London. There's a wizard hospital there right? St. Mu—u—"

"Mungo's, yes," Pomfrey mercifully supplies for her.

Lily nods. "Right, yeah. Would you mind giving me their address?" She starts shuffling through her book bag looking for a spare piece of parchment and a quill.

"Miss Evans," Lily ignores her, still riffling through her bag. "Lily," Madam Pomfrey tries. "They won't be able to treat your mother in London either."

Lily freezes, willing herself not to lose it, to remain calm as she looks back up at the older woman who is regarding her with such sadness.

Her mouth has gone dry. "Why?"

"She's a Muggle."

Which isn't really an answer, not as far as Lily is concerned.

"But she's sick. She's sick and you have a way to treat her so I don't understand—it's not like she doesn't know about the Wizarding world, I'm her daughter. The Statute of Secrecy doesn't extend to family, so I don't see why I can't bring her to the hospital?"

"I'm so sorry, really I am, but we cannot treat Muggles."

"But why?" her voice cracks, and suddenly Lily feels like she's five years old. Or twelve. asking her mother why she can't come home. Why she can't say goodbye to her dad. Why they didn't come get her.

"Are Muggles—I don't know—physically different somehow?" Lily demands before Pomfrey can answer her question.

"They're legally different."

Lily blinks.

Then again.

And again.

And suddenly her fear and sadness morph into something else.

Anger.

"Well that's fucking bullshit."

Madam Pomfrey doesn't correct her. In hindsight, Lily really ought to be grateful she doesn't lose house points or get detention but she isn't thinking clearly enough.

"I'm sure your mother's Muggle doctors will take good care of her."

"But you have a cure," Lily feels like she's outside of her body, watching this scene play out. It's surreal. She can't believe it's happening. That Madam Pomfrey can stand there and tell her to leave her mother's life up to chance because of some antiquated laws.

Biting back her anger and the scream that's sitting just behind her teeth, Lily tries again. "Please," if she thought it would make a difference she would get on her knees. "She's all I have."

But the woman before her doesn't waver, "I'm so sorry," she says, and Lily thinks she probably means it, which somehow just angers her more.

For a moment Lily just stands there, not sure she can trust herself to move and not break something. The injustice is too great. It sparks against her skin, threatening to light.

"How can you act like you think differently from them, the Death Eaters," she says coldly, nails digging into her palms. "When you treat us like this?"

“Lily—“

But she isn't interested in a reply. In more excuses or apologies. She throws the door to the office open so forcefully it slams into the wall outside it. She needs to get out. She needs fresh air. She needs something to keep her from feeling like she's losing all touch with reality. Her mother can't be sick. Madam Pomfrey can't be refusing to help. The laws can't possibly allow this.

She finds her way outside, to the lawn at the back of the school. She presses her back to the cold stone wall, fingernails chipping as they try to dig into it, to grab hold of something solid. It's fucking freezing but it feels good, cooling the sweat on her skin.

Wake up,

She thinks.

Wake up, wake up, wake up.

Because this has to be some sort of nightmare. It has to be.

It's childish but all she can focus on is the deep unfairness of it. That this is happening to her. That it's happening now. It's horrible to wish this on someone else, but she does anyway. She would sacrifice someone else's mum to save her own. She's never pretended to be a good person.

Hand groping around in her bag her fingers finally wrap around the small tin buried at the bottom. It takes her several tries to light one of the cigarettes inside because she's shaking so badly. She pulls on the smoke, hoping for the pathetic comfort it usually provides—closing her eyes and focusing on the smell. But it rings hollow today. Losing her dad was the worst thing that ever happened to her and she never wants to feel that again. Doesn't think she'll survive another hole in her chest.

“Fuck,” she throws the cigarette onto the half-frozen ground, bringing her hands to her face as she slowly sinks to the ground, snow soaking her uniform. She barely feels it. Nothing is helping. She can't think. She doesn't know what to do. Should she leave? Can she? Fuck, she's sixteen bloody years old and she doesn't even know how to get home from school. Does the Hogwarts Express run every day? Is it just for students? Is it a public train? Her nails dig into her scalp.

“Lily?”

She doesn't look up. Doesn't have the energy to act like she isn't having a fucking breakdown right now.

“Hey—Lily, you alright?”

Someone kneels down in front of her, warm hands on her knees. The touch is steady. The most settling thing she's felt all morning.

“Hey?” James Potter—because of-bloody-course it's James Potter—says softly.

Lily snuffles, dropping her hands away from her face and finding him across from her, crouched in the snow. His eyes swell with concern and she has the ridiculous desire to fall into him. To be held.

“Hi,” she finally manages, her voice a car wreck. Mangled and burning and stranded at the side of the road.

He squeezes her knees because he’s still holding them, though she can’t tell if it’s for her benefit or to keep himself from falling backwards. His eyes search her and she makes no effort to hide anything. She doesn’t really feel the need with him, as mad as that sounds. Hell, two years ago she’d have punched him in the face for getting this close to her.

Oh how things change.

“What can I do?” James asks eventually. Not “are you okay” not “what’s wrong” but “what can I do?”

She nearly kisses him then.

She doesn’t.

Knows more than she ever has before that he wouldn’t kiss her back.

But she wants to.

Oh how she wants to.

“Get Mary?” she finally croaks. It’s a strange request, all things considered—they still aren’t on great terms after New Years. But the only person who could possibly understand this—any of it—is Mary. And God, Lily could really use some of her strength right about now.

James doesn’t question it. “Okay,” another squeeze before he gets to his feet. “Will you be okay alone out here?” he asks.

Lily nods. “I can’t go back in there.”

He gives her a sympathetic smile, one that’s a little cracked around the edges in a way that makes Lily realize she’s not the only one having a bad day.

“I know the feeling,” he says softly, disappearing inside before she can ask him what he means.

PART II MARY

It isn’t fear that Mary feels as she watches Barty Crouch make a B-line for her on her way to class. If anything, it’s closer to excitement. He’s been hiding from her—from everyone in fact—which was really anticlimactic if she’s being honest. That charm on his cheek was some of her finest work and she’s been desperate to see the final product.

Crouch has clearly not been able to come up with the dissolving salve needed to take it off because he's currently covered half his face in a beige plaster that calls attention to the luridly pale pigment of his skin. Mary does her best not to laugh, but goodness it is a struggle.

"You bitch," he snits when he gets close enough.

Mary doesn't stop, barely acknowledges him at all in fact. "Good morning to you too darling," she sings as she continues on her way. All things considered, the hallway is rather quiet. Mary's running late, most students already in class.

"Do you think you're going to get away with this?" he demands, snarling at her heels like an overly excited bulldog.

"Get away with what exactly? I'm sorry, I'm very busy, you'll have to be more specific."

He tries to grab her but the second his fingers curl around her wrist she twists in a way that yanks his arm uncomfortably in its socket causing Crouch to immediately let go, howling in pain.

"Fuck," he hisses grabbing his shoulder.

Mary clicks her tongue. "Now, now, we mustn't touch what isn't ours Barty dear. I would have thought you'd have figured that out by now."

He glares daggers at her but doesn't try to grab her again, though she doesn't miss the way his eyes dart around the hallway, clearly trying to figure out how many witnesses there are and if it's safe to pull out his wand.

It's not.

Obviously he didn't think this through.

Fucking amateur.

"You're going to answer for this I hope you know that," he threatens her impotently.

Mary arches her brow, rounding the next corner. "I'm sorry, I'm still not clear on what has you throwing this little bitch fit Barty?"

"THIS!" he jabs a shaking finger at his covered cheek.

"Ah," she says knowledgeably. "Well, I can obviously see why you'd be upset about that but you really can't blame your face on me. Probably something you should take up with your parents."

Barty actually growls at that, like a dog, "You dirty fucking Mudblood, you have no idea what you've done. I—"

But Barty doesn't get to finish that particular thought as a hand yanks him back by the collar before slamming him into the stone wall beside them.

“Get the fuck away from her!” James Potter has his hand on Crouch’s throat, pinning him to the wall. The two boys are of equal height but where Barty is lanky and not quite grown into his limbs, James has the sturdy build of someone who plays Quidditch nearly as much as he breathes.

“Get off,” Crouch’s words are muffled by his clear struggle to breathe. James does not get off, shockingly enough, in fact, what he does is drive his knee into the other boy’s stomach.

Mary rolls her eyes, more than aware that everyone in the surrounding area has now stopped to stare and no doubt, if this continues, a crowd will gather.

“Enough James,” she says in a bored tone, though she has to admit that she does enjoy watching Crouch squirm.

There’s something slightly wild about the look in James’s eyes. Mary can’t remember the last time she saw him fight someone. James Potter is not, in general, a violent person, though he has been known to let Severus Snape have it from time to time. Mary can’t say she disapproves.

“James,” she snaps again, when he still hasn’t budged, Crouch’s face starting to turn a shade of red nearly dark enough to match the lipstick he’s so desperate to hide. “Who are you fighting for exactly—me? Or yourself?”

That finally seems to get through to him, his eyes meeting her’s for the first time before he blinks—like he’s waking up—quickly letting go of Crouch. The Slytherin collapses to the ground, on his hands and knees, coughing and hacking.

“Oi!” Mary shouts at the onlookers surrounding them. “Get lost before I use a permanent sticking charm to attach your tongues to your elbows.” That seems to do the trick, people quickly averting their eyes and scurrying from the corridor as quickly as their feet can carry them. It’s the smart choice. Mary doesn’t make idle threats.

She turns her attention back to the boys in front of her, walking forward and giving Crouch a nudge with her foot.

“Get the hell out of my sight before I change my mind and let him squeeze the life from you’re pathetic excuse for a body.” Out of the corner of her eye she sees James wince.

Crouch glares up at her, tears in his eyes she’s sure he wishes weren’t there, bruises already blooming across his neck. Christ, she can’t help but think, James really wasn’t fucking around. For a second she thinks she might have to pull out her wand but then Crouch stumbles to his feet and starts clumsily making his way down the hallway without sparing either of them a second glance. She is under no illusions. He isn’t done with her.

There are a few moments of tense silence, Mary leaning back against the wall, arms crossed over her chest as she watches James. Watches him try to pull himself back together. He doesn’t quite seem able to manage it. Eventually he sighs, running a hand through his hair and giving her a sheepish look.

“Are you okay?” he croaks.

Mary arches her brow. “Are you?”

His eyes dart away, which is unlike him, James Potter is many things but never meek. Never...skittish. Looking at him the word ‘frayed’ comes to mind—like a piece of fabric without a hem, the strands slowly unravelling with every pull.

“You look like shit,” she says finally.

James snorts. “Feel it too.”

She nods. “Not sleeping?”

His eyes glance up and then away again. “No. Not really. Not much,” he sighs. “Um—listen, I actually came to find you. It’s Lily.”

Wherever Mary thought this conversation was going it certainly wasn’t here. She instantly pushes off the wall, standing up straight. “What is it? What’s happened?”

James only shakes his head. “I dunno, I reckon it has to do with her mum but...I dunno. She’s having—she’s in rough shape. Outside, against the back wall.”

“And you left her?” Mary demands indignantly.

“She wanted you.”

That’s all Mary needs really, half jogging past James down the hall in the direction of the back of the school.

“Mary?” James calls out before she’s turned the corner.

She looks back at him impatiently, surprised to find him looking so small. James Potter has always been larger than life, even to the people who know him best.

“We should—I—can we talk? Later?”

Normally she would snap at him for slowing her down to ask such a stupid question, but she can feel the weight of the words. The weight of everything about him.

“Yeah James,” she says. “We can talk.”

And with that she rounds the bend.

It isn’t hard to find Lily once she gets outside—her vibrant red hair standing out against the grey winter around her. She has her knees drawn up, arms wrapped around them, face buried. Mary sits down next to her without hesitating, wet snow seeping through her skirt. Lily must

have heard her coming because she doesn't jump, doesn't even look up, and for a long moment they just sit in silence.

"Okay babe," Mary says eventually, knocking their shoulders together. "Time to tell me what's wrong."

It's another few seconds before Lily lifts her head, tilting it back against the wall behind her. She sighs, closing her eyes—squeezing them shut.

"My mum has cancer."

Mary lets that sink in. "That," she says finally, "really fucking sucks."

Lily lets out a weak laugh, opening her eyes and turning to look at Mary. Exhausted. Terrified.

"I can't lose her too," Lily whispers, like she's afraid to say it too loud.

"You're not going to," Mary doesn't hesitate. Doesn't doubt. "I won't let it happen."

Lily smiles weakly. "I knew you'd say that."

"I mean it."

"I know you do."

Mary isn't sure what to say to that so instead she waits for Lily. Knows instinctively that there's more she has to say—something else sitting on her chest. Sure enough, a few seconds later Lily sighs again, looking back out at the grounds.

"I went to Pomfrey."

"Oh?" Mary asks, genuinely curious. She's never thought about it before, what it would mean to combine magic and Muggle medicine.

Lily's mouth pulls tight. "She said she couldn't do anything."

Mary sits with that, taking in Lily's hard expression. "Couldn't?" she asks. "Or wouldn't?"

Lily lets out a breath, blowing the hair from her forehead. There's a long pause before she speaks, eyes staring harshly at the sprawling lawn in front of them. "You know, I only know about my mum because of James?"

"Oh yeah?" Mary says, going with the sudden shift in conversation, letting Lily get out whatever it is she needs to.

"He wrote his mum, pulled strings, got them to set up a Floo connection."

"That was nice of him," Mary says slowly, trying to figure out where this is going.

Lily nods her head. “It was. And he asked me, you know, to keep him updated on how my mum was even before I knew for sure that anything was wrong. And then—“ she stops herself, face scrunching as she gathers her thoughts. “And then he was here, trying to make sure I was okay, and I—I thought about telling him—he probably deserved to be told.”

“No one deserve your truth,” Mary cuts in. “Or your pain. No matter what they’ve done for you.”

Lily shoots her a dry smile. “Maybe, but it doesn’t matter, because the thought of having to explain to him that my mum is sick, and that that means something different for Muggles than it does for Wizards—something more serious—the thought of explaining to him that the magical world—this place that I’m supposedly a part of—is refusing to help, the same way they always refuse to help—it was too exhausting.”

Mary understands. Of course she does. “That’s why you wanted him to get me, not Marlene or someone else?”

Lily nods, looking over at her. “It would never have occurred to someone like James or Marlene that Pomfrey might refuse to help my mum because of...I don’t know, culture or tradition or prejudice. They never would have thought to ask whether it was ‘could’ or ‘would’.”

Yes, Mary understands completely. “What did Pomfrey say exactly?”

Lily lets out a cold laugh. “She said that, legally, Muggles are different. That magic folk can’t interfere even though they almost certainly have a cure,” she sighs. “The really fucked up thing is that if it was me they’d have me cured in a few hours. How am I supposed to live with that? How am I supposed to watch my mum get sicker knowing that?” she snuffles though her eyes remain dry. “I don’t know what to do.”

Mary can’t help but wonder how Poppy Pomfrey was able to look Lily in the eye and tell her that she would rather let her mother die than help a Muggle. Fuck the law, Mary can’t help but think, if you can save someone you save them. End of story.

“If they won’t help us,” Mary says finally. “Then we help ourselves.”

Lily looks over at her, a crease between her brows. “What do you mean?”

Mary shrugs. “You think there’s a cure? Okay, we’re witches, lets find it.”

Lily just keeps staring at her, eyes going wide. “You’re serious?” she asks after several moments.

Mary shrugs. “Absolutely,” she reaches over and squeezes Lily’s hand. “Lets cure cancer.”

PART III JAMES

It's been a few days since he talked to Sirius on the Quidditch Pitch. Sirius and Remus have returned to the dorm, have started sitting with them again in the Great Hall. In Class. Despite that, James hasn't really said much to him. Hasn't said much to anyone, skiving off pretty well everything except Quidditch practice. Luckily, Sirius seems to understand, not pushing, not following after him when he disappears into the grounds. Trudging around in the snow.

He keeps looking for answers that aren't there.

Or maybe, more than that, he keeps looking for the answers he wants. But no matter how many times he goes over everything, how he phrases it or rearranges it, he can never quite get there.

So he keeps disappearing.

Keeps running away.

Keeps pretending he doesn't know what he knows.

Some truths are too heavy to hold.

But running into Crouch and Mary shakes something in him. Reminds him that he can't just force the world to look the way he wants it to. That's how he ends up here—standing outside the Slytherin common room. Waiting.

He keeps to the shadows, making himself inconspicuous. Regulus was alone at dinner so James is fairly certain he'll walk back alone too. It's hard, staying still, fighting the urge to keep running, to keep avoiding this just like he's been doing all week. Life is much easier to swallow when you pretend all the things you hate about it don't exist.

When Regulus finally does come into view James feels his whole heart lurch, like it's trying to rip itself out of his chest. Begging to hand itself over to the boy with the stormy stare and neatly combed curls. The boy who has become so intertwined in his life over the last year that James has no idea what to do without him.

Regulus is nearly at the entrance to the common room when James finally manages to force himself to clear his throat, stepping forward. He doesn't even have to call out, Reg—always on high alert—instantly whips around, eyes colliding with James.

"Can we talk?" James asks, watching as Regulus double checks that the hallway is empty.

A moment passes before Regulus nods, immediately taking off in the direction of the seventh floor without uttering a single word. James counts to thirty before following after, shoving his hands in his pockets because they're already shaking. He keeps his head down and forces his mind to stay blank. He doesn't want to think about what's coming. He doesn't want to think about what Sirius said to him. Or Mary. He just...doesn't want to think.

Regulus is standing at the end of the bed when James enters their room. Watching the door, arms stiff at his sides. James stops, leaving far too much space between them. Now that he's

here he realizes that he doesn't know how to start. Luckily, Regulus saves him from having to.

"I see Sirius is back," he says, tone neutral. Unreadable.

James blinks. "Yeah."

Regulus is clearly waiting for James to keep going but he can't quite manage it. Doesn't have any desire to push this moment forward.

"You two have made up then?" Regulus goes on in the same tone.

"Yeah, we talked," James can't take his eyes off of Regulus. It's only been a few days since they last spoke but he feels that time like an aching hunger. An unbearable thirst. He needs this—Reg, them—he needs it like he needs to eat and drink and breathe. It fucking hurts how bad he needs it.

"About me, I'm assuming," Regulus goes on when James, once again, fails to.

He swallows, throat like sandpaper. He wants to cross the space between them, wants to gather Regulus in his arms and take him to bed. Wants to hold him for hours. Weeks. Years.

I wanted a life with you.

Just thinking that almost causes an embarrassing noise to crawl out of his mouth. Like a sob. A whine.

I wanted a life with you.

"Yeah," James says finally, voice rough. "We talked about you."

Regulus nods, face as blank as his voice, taking this all in very academically, the way he always does when he's trying to shield himself. Indifference has always been his first line of defence.

"Which means that either you convinced him to change his mind or he convinced you."

James feels his stomach threaten to upheave. "It's not that simple."

Regulus arches his brow. "I beg to differ."

"Please don't talk to me like that," James says finally, he means it but it's also a diversion. An easy way to put off answering Regulus's question. His accusation.

"Like what?" Regulus asks coldly.

James sighs, wishing he could hide things as well as Regulus. Wishing his voice didn't sound so raw. "Like I'm a stranger."

Regulus stares him down for several tense moments before eventually shaking his head, hands running through his hair and dislodging his perfectly coiffed curls.

“You wanted to talk James,” he says finally. “So talk. Because you’re not giving me very much to go on right now. It’s putting me on edge.”

James nods, because that’s fair. And then, before he can stop himself, he finds his eyes dropping down to Regulus’s forearm. It’s only for a second—maybe not even that—but, of course, Regulus catches him. His face instantly going pale.

“He told you.”

James doesn’t bother answering.

“He told you,” Regulus repeats, and James can’t tell if it’s anger or pain that Regulus seems to be so desperately fighting against, but it twists up his words, making them sound choked.

“When did it happen Reg? How long have you—“ but James isn’t even sure what the end of that sentence is.

“Why does it matter?” Regulus bristles, arms crossing over his chest like he’s trying to hold something in. Protect something.

“Because you kept it from me—because you knew it would matter and you kept it from me. Because it’s another goddamn lie—“

“I didn’t lie!”

“Bullshit Reg, that’s bullshit. So tell me—when did it happen?” This is easier at least, than the sadness.

Regulus glares back at him, though James thinks it seems a little half-hearted. “This summer.”

James feels his eyes go wide. “This summer?” he repeats, reaching out for the back of the chair next to him. “You’ve been hiding this for months?”

Regulus doesn’t bother responding.

“Holy shit Reg,” James murmurs, his free hand scrubbing across his face. “What the hell were you thinking? How the fuck could you do this?”

“What do you want me to say James?”

And the honest truth is James doesn’t know. Mostly he wants him to say that it isn’t real. That Sirius was wrong. Or lying. That Regulus would never.

“Tell me that you didn’t want it,” the words come out of him almost without permission. His voice trembling. “Tell me that they had to hold you down, that you fought back.”

But Regulus only shakes his head. “That isn’t how this works.”

“Maybe it is.”

“No. James. No. I chose this,” he rips his sleeve back, the dark ink on his forearm violent in a way that James never could have imagined. He physically shrinks away from it, feeling something inside him crumble.

“I chose it,” Regulus says again, voice finally breaking—finally exposing him.

James just keeps staring at it, like holding his hand over the fire. Every second he can’t blink the Mark away feels like tearing out his own fucking lungs.

“I don’t—“ his voice breaks and he has to wait before he can find it again, hiding at the back of his throat, unwilling to push past his lips. “I don’t understand,” he finally forces his eyes up to meet Regulus’s. “It’s fucking horrible Reg, it’s so fucking—why would you want this? How could you want this?”

Nothing makes sense. Everything inside him tangling up into a knot he’s not sure he’ll ever manage to get undone.

A long moment passes before Regulus lets his sleeve fall back into place, arms hanging lifelessly at his sides. “It’s who I am,” he says finally.

“No,” James says. Begs. “It isn’t. I know it isn’t.”

Finally, there’s something in Regulus’s eyes that James can recognize. Pity.

“Sirius said to me once, that it was better to die than to be one of them,” he looks away, like he needs a moment to collect himself. “I’m sorry James,” he says eventually, when his eyes come back. “Really I am, but I don’t want to die.”

Those last words come out as a whisper.

He sounds so young.

James just wants to hold him.

James just wants to scream.

“It’s not a choice between life and death Reg,” he finally manages to say, but Regulus remains unmoved.

“I think it is though,” something shifts, a new determination in his eyes. He steps forward, still too far to touch but closer. “Listen, I could protect you.”

James blinks, not quite understanding.

“If you switched sides, I could keep you safe, I know how to survive them. I’m good at it, I swear.”

James just keeps staring at him, brain moving too slow. “What?” and then, two words hit him in the pit of his stomach.

Switch sides.

“You want me to join the Death Eaters?” he asks numbly.

“I know how you feel about them,” Regulus presses on despite the horror on James’s face. “But they have connections, they have power, there’s a lot to be gained from being connected to them. Security above all else.”

“Security,” James repeats, still not able to comprehend what he’s hearing. Regulus takes another step forward, hands outstretched.

“Your side is going to lose James,” he says bluntly, eyes begging him to understand. “You must know that—the war has barely started and you’ve already lost. But if you switch sides now, if you let me take care of you, I’ll keep you safe. And then, when it’s over we can go away somewhere. Somewhere far. From all of it. All of them. Start over. Safe. Alive.”

I wanted a life with you.

James closes his eyes briefly, unable to look at Regulus. At his pleading hands.

“Reg,” the name comes out as a curse. A prayer. A call for mercy.

“I know it isn’t what you want,” Regulus goes on desperately, like a man treading water. “But we can do it, I know we can. We can live. If you’ll just let me—“

“Reg,” James says again, choking the other boy’s words on their way up his throat. He opens his eyes, aching at the expression on Regulus’s face. “What would be the point?”

Regulus’s brows draw together. “The point?” he repeats nervously.

“In staying alive just to live in a world run by monsters?” and then, “In living just to become monsters ourselves?”

Regulus stares at him for a moment before his hands fall back to his sides. “To be together.”

James very nearly doubles over then, the pain so real he could swear someone has just driven steel through his chest.

“Regulus—“

“You’re saying no?” his voice is all business again.

James does his best not to wince. “I’m saying no.”

Regulus nods curtly, taking a step backwards, letting James’s rejection grow rotten between them. It feels like hours before Regulus speaks again.

“This is it, isn’t it?”

The world is spinning, the floor slipping under James’s feet. “I think so,” he whispers.

The pain is a wave that James can see coming a mile away. Feel rumbling in his bones. And he knows he needs to get out of here before it hits. Knows that he won’t be able to hold it together once it does.

“I love you Regulus,” he just needs to say it. Needs Regulus to understand that, despite everything, it’s still true. Even if maybe it shouldn’t be.

“Just not enough,” Regulus says cruelly.

James does his best not to choke on that. “I asked you to come with me. To be with me.” He had. So many times.

“I know,” Regulus says. And selfishly James wants to hear it back. One more time. Hell, he’d even take it in French. He wants Regulus to promise that he still loves him too, even if it hurts, even through the betrayal and the anger. But all he gets is silence. All he sees is a stone wall.

Shaking so bad he can barely walk, James moves for the door. Desperate to leave, feeling the wave of grief edging closer, threatening to send him under.

“I hope it’s worth it,” Regulus calls out to him when he gets his hand on the doorknob. “Being a martyr.”

James doesn’t turn around, just pushes forward.

He manages to get through the corridors okay. When he cuts his way across the Gryffindor common room he thinks he hears someone call his name but he’s not really sure. The sound of his own pulse booming too loudly in his ears. Regardless, he doesn’t look up. Doesn’t stop.

He struggles up the stairs, glad to find the dorm room empty as he walks right into the bathroom, slamming the door behind him and falling to his knees on the cold tile. He grabs hold of the porcelain toilet bowl and proceeds to vomit up nearly everything he’s managed to eat today.

His body shivers and sweats and heaves as he falls back against the bathtub, the back of his hand wiping his mouth. He’s crying—he’s not sure when that started, hopefully after he got into the bathroom. James pulls himself in tight, knees tucked into his chest, arms wrapping around them, face buried. He makes himself small. As small as he possibly can. And then he lets the wave wash over him. This unmanageable pain. He can’t think anything. Can’t do anything. He just has to feel. It’s too strong and too loud for him to do anything else.

There’s a light knock on the door. “Prongs?”

He doesn't answer.

Can't.

"James?"

It's Sirius. Of course.

"I'm going to open the door okay?" Sirius says eventually. James doesn't reply but doesn't try to stop him either, listening to the sound of the door being slowly pushed open. If Sirius is surprised by the state he finds James in he doesn't let it show, just sits next to him on the floor and wraps his arm around him.

James lets himself be held, the sobs turning vicious now, rattling through him, shaking his ribs.

"I'm sorry," he finally manages to say. Though he's not sure what for. There's so much lately. He's done everything wrong.

"Don't be," Sirius says, sounding steady. A few seconds pass and then; "for what it's worth, I'm sorry too."

James pushes further into Sirius's side wondering when it'll stop. The crying. The pain. He isn't at all certain that it will. This heartbreak feels endless. This heartbreak eats him whole.

PART IV REMUS

He's supposed to be doing coursework but he can't concentrate, eyes continuously going to the stairs that lead up to their dormitory. Remus has seen James upset before—more than he would like recently—but when he walked into the common room tonight the pain on his face was something else.

Sirius barely waited for him to get up the stairs before he was on his feet, chasing after him. Part of Remus wants to follow but mostly he knows that this isn't about him—not the way that it's about Sirius and James. He needs to give them space. Let them work through it together.

So he stays behind.

It's something he's used to.

"What do you reckon that was about?" Peter asks after a few minutes, nodding his head in the direction of the dorms.

Remus hesitates, dropping his eyes back down to the parchment in front of him. He keeps his voice low when he answers. "If I had to guess, I'd say that James and Regulus have...fallen out."

“Huh,” Peter hums thoughtfully, causing Remus to look up. “He seemed pretty...I don’t know, pretty gone on him, didn’t he?”

Remus feels a small ache in his chest. “Yeah, yeah I think he was.”

“So why end things then?”

Remus arches his brow. “What makes you so certain it wasn’t the other way around?”

“Because,” Peter snorts, “if Regulus had broken up with James he’d have stormed in here with some big plan to win him back. Not—you know—not looking like that,” he nods again at the stairs. Remus reckons he’s probably right.

“I think it just became too much,” he says, feeling a little uncomfortable discussing this at all. He doesn’t want to gossip about their friend. Doesn’t want to make assumptions about a relationship he absolutely did not understand.

“What became too much?” Peter asks, chewing on the end of his quill.

Remus wrinkles his nose—he’s always thought that was a gross habit, but he’s not Peter’s mum so he’s not about to say anything about it.

“You know, the differences between them, the war.”

“I don’t see why the war should matter to them.”

Remus blinks, momentarily distracted from Peter’s disgusting quill chewing habit. “Er—you don’t?”

He shrugs. “Why would it?”

“Um...well...it kind of...shows a lot about person. How they feel about things like that,” he squints at the boy across from him. “I mean, how could it not matter?”

Another shrug, though thankfully this one dislodges the quill from Peter’s mouth. “Just politics ‘innit?”

Remus stares back at him. “Just politics?” he repeats slowly. “What—what do you mean?” Something uneasy has started to settle in Remus’s chest.

“Well like, my mum votes Tory and my dad votes Labour but they’re still married.”

Remus is thrown for a minute. “Your parents vote in the Muggle elections?”

“Sure. They think it’s fun or something. Like a game. They make bets.”

Remus opens his mouth and then closes it, deciding that that is a discussion for another time. “This—Voldemort, the Death Eaters—they’re not exactly a bunch of blokes running for office.”

“I mean, they sort of are,” Peter says, like that’s a totally reasonable thing to think. “They have their supporters, the Ministry has theirs, they’re both, y’know, campaigning.”

Remus feels like he’s just fallen into another dimension where the activities of Voldemort are so mundane that they can be considered ‘campaigning’. Like planting a sign on someone’s lawn or holding a rally.

“Right, sure, except the Death Eaters ‘campaign’ by murdering people,” he expects to see horror in Peter’s eyes when he realizes what he’s just said, the comparisons he’s just made, the way he’s just dismissed the disgusting things the Death Eaters want. That they’ve done. But he doesn’t see any of that.

“Suppose,” is all Peter says, before he looks back down at his coursework, teeth once again going to town on his quill. “Hey, what’d you get for number seven?”

Chapter End Notes

Salut beautiful people!

I'm sorry this is late! I was struggling, but we're here.

Also, just to be clear, this is not the end of Reg and James interacting or thinking about each other, they are always the focus of this fic. The "how" just sort of changes.

OKAY thank you love you hope you're having a great day!

Chapter 40

Chapter Summary

There's a lot more making out in this chapter than I think any of us expected.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

PART I REGULUS

After Patroclus fails to convince Achilles to fight for the Greeks.

After Achilles lets Patroclus face the Trojans without him.

The great warrior tilts his head back and asks the gods to “grant that he may return unharmed.”

Bring him back to me, he begs them.

Bring him back to me.

Bring him back.

Gods are a Muggle invention and from what Regulus can tell they are rather unreliable when it comes to keeping people safe. But then, he’s not sure that magic has ever really protected anyone he loves either.

He stares at the door for a long time after James leaves.

Bring him back to me.

Bring him back to me.

Bring him back.

But Wizards don’t know how to pray. And Regulus doubts the gods would listen even if they did.

He does manage to make it back to the Slytherin dorms eventually, though he isn’t really sure how. His thoughts are radio static. Nothing in focus. Nothing clear. At least not until the moment he enters the common room. For some reason the noise—or the people—something jolts him. Causing things to start becoming real all of the sudden.

He's hyperventilating by the time he reaches the bottom of the stairs, grabbing hold of the banister for support. This can't happen here. It can't. He cannot have a fucking breakdown in the Slytherin common room. He begs his legs to move but they won't, tries to slow down his breaths and blink away the blurring in his eyes. He's been through so much worse than this. He doesn't know why it's taking him apart.

"Howdy partner," says a familiarly cheery voice as Cerci comes down the stairs. Regulus can see her but only barely, partly hidden by the black that's started to erase the edges of his vision. If he doesn't get his breathing under control he's going to faint.

"Regulus?" he hears her say, concerned.

He's hoping no one else has noticed him. He's not doing anything—literally not doing anything—not crying or shouting or moving. He's hoping everyone else is too busy to see him frozen at the bottom of the stairs. To notice the wheezing noises his breath makes as he sucks it in too fast.

"Hey," Cerci is right in front of him now, voice low, "are you okay?"

She reaches out to touch him and he immediately jerks back. Cerci's eyes going wide and he wants to explain to her that he just can't bear to be touched right now. That he's too raw. But when he opens his mouth, to his horror, all that comes out is a sob. He instantly slams it shut again.

"Okay," Cerci says, somehow making it sound like this is all perfectly normal. "Okay, it's okay. You trying to get to your room?"

Regulus closes his eyes briefly, so angry with himself, with his body, with his mind, for falling to pieces like this. He's meant to be stronger. Meant to be able to put this pain in a box and act as though nothing can touch him. Leave it to James Potter to be too fucking big. To hurt too much for any of Regulus's hiding places to hold.

After a moment, teeth gritted, Regulus nods.

"Okay, we can do that, why don't you just look down, just focus on my feet okay? Just focus on them and nothing else. Just do what they do."

Regulus's eyes fly open to find a determined Cerci across from him. After a moment he nods again, dropping his head down to stare at the floor. To focus on her shoes. Her shoes and nothing else, his whole world shrinking.

She takes one step. He takes one step. Miraculously. Thankfully.

Somehow they manage to make it all the way to the door of his room like that. With Regulus just focusing on her shoes, not letting his thoughts stray. Not letting himself pay attention to rest of the world.

"Hey Reg?" Cerci says softly—so softly Regulus wouldn't have thought it possible for the human voice to sound like that. "We're here?" she says after they spend several moments

standing still, Regulus not lifting his gaze.

When he does finally look at the door he feels the panic return, listening to the sounds of Evan and Barty bickering. He'll need to get past them. Need to lock himself in the bathroom where he can lose it in peace. He knows it won't be that simple of course, that Evan will want to talk to him, because he always wants to talk, and Barty will get growly if he hogs the bathroom for too long. He doesn't want to be around either of them but he doesn't know where else to go.

"Give me a minute," Cerci says suddenly, causing Regulus to jump as he looks over at her. But she's already moving, pushing through the door into the dorm room and leaving Regulus thoroughly confused.

There's silence for a second and then shouting. Regulus can't really make out the words, his brain still fuzzy, the sound of static still loud in his ears. After what feels like ages but is probably only ten minutes at most, the door swings open viciously and Barty marches out fuming, not even looking at Regulus as he stalks down the hallway. Following after is a much more content looking Evan, who shoots Regulus a wide grin when he sees him.

"Go get her champ," he says, clapping Regulus on the shoulder as he passes, causing every atom in Regulus's body to scream. Luckily Evan doesn't stop, doesn't hear the way Regulus starts gasping like he's just been held under water.

For some reason he still doesn't go inside the room. Probably because his brain is broken. Just stands there in the hallway trying not to collapse. Eventually Cerci comes to the door, opening it wide for him.

"It's okay," she says, without pity or disgust. "It's empty."

Regulus doesn't know how she knew what he needed but he can't ask, nodding because that seems to be the one form of communication he can manage at the moment. He walks in and quickly sits down on his bed, dropping his head between his knees and taking in big gulps of air.

Inhale.

Exhale.

Inhale.

Exhale.

"Do you want me to leave?" Cerci asks.

"No," Regulus's voice surprises him. Not just because it crackles and whines, like he's been screaming it raw. But also because of what it says. No. He hadn't realized he wanted her here until this moment.

"Okay," she says softly and he listens to the sound of her walking over to the bed next to him—Evan's—and sitting down.

Inhale.

Exhale.

Inhale.

Exhale.

“Did you tell them we were going to shag?” he somehow manages to ask, head still down.

Cerci laughs, it’s a comforting sound. “No,” she says. “But I may have heavily implied it. Hope that’s okay.”

Regulus snorts, sitting up slowly and wiping at his eyes which he finds are frustratingly damp. When he meets Cerci’s stare there’s nothing pitying about it and he’s grateful.

“Thank you,” Regulus manages eventually.

Cerci offers him a gentle smile. “Of course.”

Inhale.

Exhale.

“You don’t have to tell me,” Cerci goes on eventually, causing Regulus to grimace. “But I have to ask, at least once; what happened?”

Inhale.

Exhale.

Regulus looks down at his hands, shaking where they grip his knees. He hates how inescapable this pain feels. There’s nothing he can do to remedy it, to dull it. Wherever he goes, however much time passes, he knows it will always hurt, because James will always be gone. Because Regulus will always be alone.

“Regulus,” the urgency in Cerci’s voice wakes him up and he finds her kneeling on the floor, hands hovering close to him but not touching.

“Regulus breathe.”

What?

“Regulus, in and out, with me, come on.”

It’s only then. When he tries to speak, that he realizes he’s started hyperventilating again. Fucking of course he has.

“In and out,” Cerci repeats, making her own breaths big and over exaggerated. He has a brief flash of someone else kneeling in front of him. In a corridor. Begging him to breathe.

Regulus, I need you to breathe okay?

Okay, it's okay, you're okay.

So, it turns out my mum knows about Patroclus and Achilles.

Funny, he always thought his mother would be the one to break him. Or Bellatrix. Maybe even Lucius. But he should have known. Because of course. Of course it's James-fucking-Potter. With his warm hands and sunrise laugh and heart that lives on his goddamn sleeve. Like an idiot. Like a work of art.

"Regulus? Regulus listen to me, you're okay, everything is okay. Just breathe."

Which isn't true.

Nothing is okay.

"I'm going to need you to help me out here, I don't know what to do."

He should have told her to leave. This isn't her problem and he hates that she's seeing him like this.

"Talk," his voice is barely there, forced out on an exhale that shakes and trembles and immediately gets sucked back in.

"Talk?" she repeats, and he really hopes she doesn't need more instruction because he can't give her any. "Okay, okay, I can talk. I'm like pro at talking."

Anyway, I started reading the Iliad, which I thought was going to be a bit more, you know, soppy, but it's mostly a bunch of guys killing each other. Not that I'm complaining.

"So my sister is getting married—or she's engaged—whatever, my point is, a wedding is eminent. And I am absolutely dreading it. First of all her fiancé is like—" she makes a retching noise. "Y'know?"

And like, obviously I'm all for the Greeks, but, I've got to be honest, I kinda like Hector.

"I mean, she's always had terrible taste in men but at least she wasn't marrying any of them. Now I'm supposed to call this guy my brother? How weird is that? He is taking her name though, because, well, you know, being a Greengrass is kind of a whole thing—anyway, I told her I thought it was very progressive of them, the man taking the woman's last name, and I swear Cereus almost set me on fire with her eyes."

"Your sister's name is Cereus?"

Cerci beams at him, at the sound of the wretched thing his voice currently is. "Oh hey."

There you are.

Regulus swallows around the bile in his throat and forces his hands to let go of his knees. He's almost certain his nails have poked holes in his trousers.

"Your parents named you Cereus and Cerci?" he asks again, clearing his throat. Trying to focus on here and now and this. He can handle this. This moment. Even if he can't bear the thought of anything that's supposed to come after it.

"You're one to talk," she teases, "Your parents named you Regulus and Sirius."

"They're stars, it's tradition," he says, without much conviction, flexing his fingers in an attempt to stop them aching. "What kind of name is Cereus?"

Cerci laughs. "Um...I think it's a kind of cactus?"

Regulus can't help but smile at that, even if it is a little shaky. "So you get named after one of the most powerful witches in history and your sister gets named after...a cactus?"

"She was their first born, they'd never named anything before!"

"They had nine months to figure something out and the best thing they could come up with was Cereus?"

"Okay," Cerci says, trying to hold in another laugh. "I really think you have to let this go."

"I think your sister should sue your parents for emotional trauma, giving her a name like that."

"Oh my God, you're such a snob."

"I have standards, there's difference."

Cerci rolls her eyes, sitting back and stretching her legs out in front of her. The playfulness in her eyes dims. "Are you—are you okay?"

Regulus almost laughs, she must see it in his eyes because she tries again.

"What I mean is—" he can see her trying to figure out the best way to phrase this. He can't blame her considering her last question sent him spiralling into a panic attack, like some weak pathetic child. "Did someone hurt you?"

The ridiculous thing is, he nearly says yes. Because he aches. Because he feels hurt.

"I—" he stops, swallowing around the lump in his throat and forcing memories back with every ounce of mental strength he still possesses. "Actually, I think I'm the one who hurt someone."

Cerci nods. "That's the worst feeling."

For a second he almost asks her how she could possibly know, because the idea of Cerci hurting anyone seems ridiculous. But he stops himself. Certain that hearing about what she

considers hurt would only make him feel worse.

“Can you apologize?”

He smiles ruefully. “No. Or I could, but it wouldn’t change anything.”

She chews on her bottom lip, using more of a filter than she ever has before. “Why not?” she asks finally. “I mean, why won’t it change anything?”

Regulus lets out a deep breath, resisting the urge to start digging his nails back into his skin. “Because I am sorry, but I’m not going to...to stop doing the thing that hurts them. I can’t. So in the end, it doesn’t matter.”

Cerci nods like she understands, maybe she does. “That sounds...really hard.”

“Yeah,” Regulus swallows, not prepared for the weakness that bleeds out through that one word.

“They’re important to you, this person?”

I love you Regulus.

Regulus had always expected James to walk away once he saw the Mark. Had counted on it in fact. To save James from Regulus’s selfishness. To do for him what he couldn’t seem to do once he was in the same room as James. Once he could feel him and hear him and touch him. But what he hadn’t expected was that.

I love you Regulus.

He had been certain there would be more anger. Betrayal. Certain that James would hate him, look at him with disgust the way Sirius sometimes does. But no.

I love you Regulus.

He’s certain that if you crack open his chest right now you’ll find those words feasting on his heart.

“Yes, he’s important,” Regulus finally manages to whisper.

For a long moment—especially for Cerci—neither of them speak, and then Cerci shuffles, moving so that her back is against Regulus’s bed, her shoulder lightly pressing into his leg. The whisper of a touch. So he can feel her without her having to lay her hands on him—hands that grope and grab and take. Instead he gets to just feel... her. He exhales shakily before pressing back.

“Do you want me to stay for a bit?” she asks after a while.

“Yes,” he says, even though he feels embarrassed.

“Do you want me to keep talking?”

He lets out a breath that might have been a laugh if he had the energy, “Yes, tell me more about your terribly named sister and her horrible fiancé.”

“He really is horrible,” she says sincerely. “Oh—and I haven’t even started telling you about the flower drama!”

PART II MARLENE

The first time Marlene kisses Dorcas Meadows she’s drunk. Actually, they’re both drunk. Which Marlene thinks is probably a good thing. It gives them an excuse. A way out. Drunk girls kiss all the time. It doesn’t mean anything.

And obviously this kiss doesn’t mean anything.

Right?

It can’t.

Not even when Dorcas’s hand slides up her neck and cradles her face, or when Marlene tangles her fingers in the other girl’s hair, or when that noise escapes Marlene’s mouth.

They’re drunk.

Alcohol makes people do stupid things.

Things they regret.

The problem is, she never does regret that kiss.

The problem is, the second time they’re both dead sober.

Marlene isn’t even sure how it happens. They’re in Hogsmeade talking about Quidditch. About books. About music. And it’s so easy. And terrifying. And exciting. Every time she makes Dorcas laugh it feels like a hundred bubbles are filling up her stomach. Like she’s made out of air.

This time it’s Dorcas. Dorcas who nudges her subtly into the alley between Gladrags and Scrivenshaft’s. Who crowds her against the brick wall, one hand by her head, the other on her hip. Who kisses her. Who tugs her bottom lip between her teeth and presses her warm body against Marlene. Who licks her way into Marlene’s mouth.

They don’t talk.

Not before. Not during. Not after.

Well, I mean, of course they talk. About Quidditch and books and music. But not about kissing. Never about kissing.

Marlene starts to think that maybe the “not talking” is kind of like the alcohol. If they don’t name it than it doesn’t matter.

Then it doesn’t mean anything.

Right?

The third time is the worst, because Marlene is almost positive she does something wrong.

It’s late, she’s in the library, sitting at the back, furiously trying to figure out which bloody potion uses African Sea Salt—when Dorcas drops into the chair next to her.

“Hey,” Dorcas says.

“Hey,” Marlene replies, feeling the press of Dorcas’s thigh against her own under the table.

“Library’s about to close you know,” she says, ducking her head a little bit so she can catch Marlene’s eye.

“I still have an hour, and if I head back to the common room I’ll never get anything done. That place is a zoo.”

Dorcas smiles at her. “You love it.”

Marlene can’t help but smile back, cheeks pinking. “Well, yeah, obviously. But not right now when I’m trying to catch up on my coursework.”

“Come on Mar,” she jostles their legs under the table sending sparks of heat through Marlene’s whole body. Marlene has touched people before. Boys. Not like—not a lot—not, you know, not like Mary. But she has touched boys. They just always felt like bodies. And Dorcas feels like magic.

“I know for a fact that’s not due until the end of the week. You can call it a night.”

Marlene turns to look at her, not realizing how close they are, not realizing that Dorcas has leaned in. She has the most beautiful brown eyes, flecked with gold in the sunlight, her skin dark as Marlene’s is light. She smells like lavender—something spicy and sweet. She smells like something that Marlene wants to taste.

And it’s so stupid because they’re in the library and sure it’s late and empty but still, anyone could walk by. But Dorcas always makes Marlene’s head go fuzzy, especially when she’s this close. When she’s touching her.

So Marlene leans forward, prepared to be stopped, to be pushed away, but that doesn’t happen. Dorcas welcomes her kiss with a pleased hum, nearly pulling Marlene into her lap as she tugs on her jumper. This is a supernova kiss—a universe ending, stars exploding, every atom in Marlene’s body dancing—kiss. She forgets about the library. The danger. She wants to stay here forever. She wants to live between Dorcas’s arms.

“Wait—wait,” Dorcas says breathily, pushing back just far enough that their noses brush.

Marlene blinks still in a daze.

“What are we doing?”

Marlene blinks some more. “What?” she asks.

“This,” Dorcas waves a finger between them. “What is this?”

Marlene has no idea how to answer that question. She thought they weren’t talking about it. Thought that was what Dorcas wanted. She still can’t really read her. Does she not want Marlene to kiss her? She’d seemed pretty into it but...

“Um...I...this is fun?” she curses herself almost as soon as the words come out of her mouth. Fun? FUN. But what else is she supposed to say?

Well, apparently something else, because Dorcas almost immediately pulls away.

“Fun?” she asks, expression guarded.

“Er—no?” Marlene tries, not at all helping her cause.

Dorcas arches her brow. “No?” That definitely was also the wrong thing to say.

“I’m sorry—what do you want me to say?” and she doesn’t mean it to come out sounding so...rude. It’s just that she really doesn’t know. How is she supposed to know?! They’ve never talked about kissing! Never talked about a “this” or a “we”.

There’s a pause that goes on for far too long. “Never mind,” Dorcas says eventually, fully getting out of her chair.

“Hey—woah—okay wait, that came out wrong,” probably, maybe, I mean, she’s still not exactly sure what answer Dorcas is looking for.

“Nah, you’re alright Mar,” Dorcas gives her a tight smile. “I’ll see you in class yeah?” she doesn’t wait for an answer, walking through the bookshelves towards the exit in record time.

For a minute all Marlene can do is sit and stare at the spot where Dorcas had been sitting, where Dorcas had been KISSING her, the whole interaction giving her such whiplash that she has absolutely no idea what to do with it.

“Shit,” she hisses under her breath. “I really fucked that up, didn’t I?”

Predictably, her potions coursework does not respond.

It’s only about twenty minutes later that Marlene gives up and heads back to the dorms. She can’t concentrate, her brain running through her interaction with Dorcas over and over again in excruciating detail. She cringes harder with each rewatch.

She tries to catch Dorcas's eye when she sees her in the common room but Dorcas either doesn't know she's there or is trying very hard to avoid looking at her, eventually turning her back to Marlene completely. Marlene sighs before giving up and heading to her room.

She wishes she could ask Mary for advice but of course she can't. Even if she pretended it was a boy with Mary's sleuthing skills and her many connections within the Hogwarts gossip channels she'd figure out Marlene was lying in no time and then it wouldn't be long before she would figure out what was really going on. Marlene isn't ready for that, especially considering SHE isn't really sure what's going on.

"Hey," she says flatly as she walks into the dorm room, dropping her book bag at the foot of her bed and collapsing onto it face first.

Mary and Lily are both there, sitting on Mary's bed, books spread around them, their voices low. Which, actually, now that Marlene thinks about it, is a little odd. They haven't been spending much time together since New Year's. Neither of them will say what happened but Marlene has a sneaking suspicion it somehow involves James Potter. James who is a mess all on his own. Marlene doesn't even know where to begin with that boy.

After a few more minutes of listening to them whisper Marlene props herself up on her elbows and looks over at the bed across from her.

"I guess you guys made up then?" she asks.

"Made up what? Why are you talking gibberish Marlene?" Mary says with the flourish of her hand, eyes not leaving the page in front of her.

"Jeez Mary, must you be such a brat?" Lily asks.

"Yes," Mary says without hesitating, earning her an eye roll from Lily before she turns her attention to Marlene. "Believe it or not, we actually have worked things out."

Marlene bites back a smile. "Good, the tension in here was getting a little bit much."

Mary scoffs but still doesn't look up. Marlene leans over trying to figure out what they're working on but she can't recognize any of the books surrounding them.

"What're you guys doing?" she asks, scooting closer to the edge of her bed.

There's a pause, Mary and Lily exchanging a quick glance, communicating something Marlene doesn't understand.

"My mum," Lily says eventually. "She's sick."

Marlene feels her eyes go wide. "Sick? What do you mean?" Of course she knows what sick means, but the way her friends are acting she can't help but feel that there's more. That there's something she's missing.

"She has cancer," Lily goes on.

“Cancer?” okay, now Marlene is really lost. “What?”

“It’s a very serious Muggle illness that we’re currently trying to figure out the cure for,” Mary answers, slightly more briskly than Lily.

Marlene isn’t sure if that’s a joke or not, though judging by both their expressions Mary is being very serious.

“You’re going to try to cure Lily’s mum?” Marlene repeats, wondering if either of them will hear how mad it sounds when it’s repeated back to them. “No offence but neither of you are exactly mediwizards.”

“Don’t put us in a box,” Mary sing-songs, closing the book in her lap and reaching for a new one.

“We know it’s a long shot,” Lily says, looking tired. “But it’s something. Better than sitting around and...waiting.”

There is a heaviness in her normally lively friend that makes something in Marlene ache. “Have you talked to Madam Pomfrey?”

“Ha!” Mary scoffs from beside her.

“What Mary means is yes, I talked to her,” Lily runs a hand over her face, letting out a deep breath. “She basically said there’s nothing she can do because my mum is a Muggle.”

“Bollocks,” Marlene hisses.

Lily offers her a weak smile. “Pretty much, yeah.”

Marlene looks back down at the plethora of books surrounding her friends, before getting up and joining them on Mary’s bed, pulling one of the books towards herself. Both Lily and Mary look up at her.

“What? You really think I’m not going to help? Give me a break.”

“You don’t have to—“

“Lily, don’t be stupid, of course she does,” Mary says, before sending Marlene a wink.

When meeting Lily’s exasperated stare all Marlene can do is shrug, smiling a little. “She’s right.”

“Thank you,” Lily says softly, causing Marlene to reach out, grabbing hold of her hand and giving it a squeeze.

“Of course, now, what are we looking for exactly?”

Trying to help Lily's mum is a good distraction from the fact that Dorcas is currently avoiding her. Not that Marlene is happy that Lily's mum is sick, obviously. But, as things are, it helps keep her mind off things. Sort of. Mostly.

"Oi? Earth to McKinnon?"

Marlene jolts upright, tearing her eyes away from where Dorcas is currently sitting across the room.

"Sorry, what?"

Mary arches her brow. "Space cadet much?"

"Sorry," Marlene repeats. "I think Quidditch practice really took it out of me this morning."

Mary gives her a skeptical once over. "Mhm. Me and Lily are heading to the library after supper, you coming?"

Currently they're sitting in the common room, Lily off doing whatever it is that Prefects do—probably giving some poor sucker a detention.

"Uh, sure, yeah, totally."

Mary eyes her again. "You sure you're okay?"

It takes every ounce of her self-control not to look back at Dorcas. "Definitely."

Marlene makes up some excuse about homework to stay behind when Mary eventually packs up and heads down to the Great Hall. She just needs some time to think. It's purely a coincidence that Dorcas is now also sitting alone. The common room significantly emptier what with most people heading down for supper.

After a solid ten minutes of pretending she's doing work, Marlene eventually gets up the courage to talk to her.

"Hi," she says lamely, clutching her half-finished essay to her chest, quill stuck through the bun at the back of her head. She probably looks mad.

Dorcas glances up and gives her a polite smile. Polite. Like they're acquaintances. Merlin Marlene really fucked up.

"Hey Mar," Dorcas says, before turning her attention back to her textbook.

"Er..." she really, really, didn't think this through. "Can—er—I join you?"

Another polite smile. "Sure."

Marlene does her best not to grimace. This might be the most smiley cold shoulder she's ever gotten. For a second she considers taking it back and just walking out of the common room,

but she's a Gryffindor goddamnit, so instead she sits down, spreading her homework out onto the table like she's actually going to be able to concentrate on anything.

The properties of the ginger root, she begins to read, foot bouncing nervously under the table as she remains too aware of Dorcas sitting next to her.

The properties of the ginger root—fuck, no, she just read that. She blinks and tries again.

The properties of the ginger root are not properly activated unless the ingredient is sliced from right to left at a 90 degree angle—

Dorcas shifts beside her, not touching, not like before when they would sit with their legs pressed together or their feet or, on very rare and wonderful occasions, their pinky fingers. If anything, Marlene is pretty sure she shifts away.

The properties of the ginger root—oh goddamnit.

She sighs, sitting back and running a hand over her face. Traitorous eyes going immediately to Dorcas's neck, the spot where her hair curls into little wisps just at the nape and around her ears. Marlene has never kissed her there but she desperately wants to.

“Dorcas,” she says eventually, unable to bear sitting in silence anymore.

“Hmm?” Dorcas doesn't look up from her textbook, though Marlene is fairly certain that her eyes aren't moving.

“I—I'm really sorry okay?”

She can see Dorcas shift but the other girl still doesn't look around. “For what?”

Marlene opens her mouth but nothing comes out. She just doesn't know, that's the thing. She doesn't know what she did. She doesn't know how to do any of this. She's never tried before. Never had a reason to. She curses herself for tuning out Mary every time she started flirting with a boy—those were valuable skills she could have been learning.

When the silence stretches on for too long Dorcas sighs. “Don't worry about it Mar, okay? We just...want different things.” She starts gathering up her books.

“We do?” Marlene asks, because she's not at all certain that's true. Especially considering the only thing she really wants is Dorcas.

“Yeah,” Dorcas slips her book bag over her shoulder. “I'm gonna head down to dinner, I'll see you,” she doesn't make eye contact with Marlene as she leaves the common room—Marlene who's mouth is desperately opening and closing like a fish out of water, trying to find the words.

“What do you want though?” she asks too late, the empty common room echoing the question back to her.

“Ow!” Marlene grumbles the next morning when Mary very rudely punches her in the shoulder. Rudely and undeservedly. She’s sitting on the bench in the Quidditch locker room, half dressed in her uniform and half still in her kit.

Mary drops down into the spot next to her fully dressed. It’s only then that Marlene realizes they’re alone.

“Where’d everyone go?” she asks, looking about.

Mary arches her brow. “Breakfast. Now spill.”

Marlene blinks. “Spill? Spill what?”

Mary waves her hand about in an exasperated motion. “Whatever it is that’s been causing you to bloody disassociate the last few days.”

“I—what?—what are you talking about?” she wishes she sounded more indignant and less flustered. She starts trying to finish getting changed.

“Uh-huh, come on Mar,” Mary pinches her side causing Marlene to yelp and jump away, sending Mary a vicious glare. “You’re not fooling anyone. Especially not me.”

It’s true that Mary is somewhat inconveniently observant. Always has been. It’s like her evil superpower or something. Marlene cautiously returns to the spot in front of her locker.

“It’s nothing just stress. School.”

“Stress? Stress about what?”

“I don’t know,” Marlene says, sounding a bit like a pouty child even to herself. “Just stuff.”

“Stuff?”

“Yeah.”

“Stuff Marlene?”

“That’s what I said.”

“Really?”

Marlene slams her locker shut, rounding on her best friend. “What do you want from me Mary?”

Predictably, Mary is completely unfazed. “How about the truth?”

“Okay fine, the truth—the truth is that there’s—there’s this person.” She brings her hands up to her face already able to feel it heating up with embarrassment.

“A person? A person I know?”

She drops her hands to give Mary a flat stare. “A person Mary.”

The other girl holds up her hands in surrender. “Okay, okay. There’s a person?”

Marlene nods before she starts to pace, unable to have this conversation while standing still and looking Mary in the eye. Slightly horrified with herself for having this conversation at all.

“There’s a person and I think I really messed things up but I don’t know how.”

“Well,” Mary says slowly. “What happened?”

“I don’t know!”

“Start from the beginning.”

Marlene looks at her briefly. “The beginning?”

“The beginning of the problem,” Mary clarifies.

Marlene huffs, “Well, I mean, we were kissing—“

“Ah, so this is a person we kiss.”

Marlene shoots her another look that has Mary raising her hands in surrender, “Sorry, go on.”

Marlene’s cheeks are blushing furiously at this point and she can only hope that her freckles help to hide that fact at least a little. “So we were kissing and then—then they were all “What are we doing?” and I was all “What?” because I thought what we were doing was pretty obvious you know, like we were kissing, that’s what we were doing?”

“Right,” Mary says, and Marlene pretends that she can’t hear her holding back a laugh.

“And then they were all “What is this?” and I—I didn’t know what to say,” Marlene admits pathetically.

“Did you tell them that?” Mary asks, causing Marlene to let out a whine before covering her eyes with her hands.

“No! Was that an option? I didn’t know that was an option!”

“You’re always allowed to tell someone when you don’t know the answer, especially when it’s a person you kiss,” Mary says, like it’s simple, which to her it probably is. To everyone other than Marlene it probably is.

“So,” Mary prompts when Marlene doesn’t go on. “What’d you say?”

“Oh—er—I—um—I can’t remember.”

“Marlene,” she doesn’t need to look at Mary to know the expression she’s making right now.

Marlene throws her arms up in the air in defeat. “I said it was fun okay?”

“Fun?” Mary repeats.

Marlene lets out a pitiful moan. “Yes. Fun. They asked “What is this?” and I said “This is fun” and then they said “never mind” and now they won’t talk to me!” she stops her pacing, finally turning to face her best friend.

“Wow,” Mary says eventually. “You really fucked that up huh?”

Marlene doesn’t dignify that with a response instead collapsing back down onto the bench in defeat.

“But what was I supposed to say?” she asks, rolling her head towards the other girl. “What was the right answer?”

Mary looks back at her, eyes soft the way they only get in moments like this, when it’s just the two of them. “Well, what do you want?”

Marlene scrunches her nose. “What do you mean?”

“This thing with this person that you kiss. What do you want it to be? What do you want from them?”

“I don’t want anything from them,” Marlene says automatically. “I just want to—to be with them. Like all the time. It’s bloody awful.”

Mary smiles a little. “And do you want to be with anyone else?”

Marlene blows out her lips like a horse. “Hell no. I don’t have the energy to do this with with one person let alone multiple people.”

“Then you want something serious?”

Marlene shrugs. “Yeah, I guess. Yeah.”

“Well, then you need to tell them.”

Marlene chews on her bottom lip. “You think that’ll help?”

Mary shrugs, getting to her feet and patting Marlene on the shoulder. “Can’t hurt to try.”

“Okay,” Marlene nods. “Okay yeah I’ll...I’ll do that.”

“Good,” Mary says, already half-way out the door, smiling to herself. “Tell Dorcas I say hi.”

Marlene gapes after her.

Fucking evil superpower.

“Hi,” Marlene drops into the chair next to Dorcas. It’s late, the library nearly empty, Dorcas is sitting at the back.

Dorcas sighs, looking up and letting that polite smile flicker across her lips again. “Hi Marlene, I’m actually kind of busy.”

“Okay, no worries, I promise I won’t take long, I just—I really need to tell you something?”

Dorcas looks at her warily but eventually nods her head. “Okay...shoot?”

Marlene exhales, trying to get her thoughts in order. She’s only gone over this in her head like a thousand times. Still, her hands are shaking, little bubbles of electricity thrumming under her skin.

“You said that we don’t want the same thing—which, not to start on the wrong foot here, but isn’t really fair, since you’ve never actually toled me what it is that you want.”

Dorcas opens her mouth but Marlene quickly presses forward. “Sorry, sorry, just—I have to get this out okay?”

Dorcas blinks at her before nodding. “Yeah okay.”

Marlene takes a fortifying breath. “See, the other night? I didn’t really understand what you were asking me. And even if I had, I’m not sure I could have given you an answer. That I could have told you what I wanted because—” she breaks off, eyes dropping to the table top for a moment. “Because it didn’t really occur to me that I could want anything. With—you know—this. And when you suggested that I could it kind of blew my mind for a second.”

Marlene takes in a another deep breath. “See, the thing is, it’s a scary questions because I don’t know if you’ll like the answer. But I—” her voice shakes. “I want you.” Marlene presses her leg to Dorcas’s under the table, reaching for her eyes and holding them still once she gets them. “I want you,” she whispers again. “Only you. All the time. It’s a little ridiculous.”

She watches Dorcas’s eyes go wide.

“This is fun, it is,” Marlene pushes on. “But it’s also,” she knocks their knees together. “Important.”

They’ve leaned so close together that Marlene can hear Dorcas swallow. “Yeah?” she asks Marlene eventually, voice weak.

“Yes.”

She watches Dorcas’s eyes dart around before she leans forward, quickly pressing their mouths together.

Their fourth kiss.

Marlene almost cheers.

“It’s important to me too,” Dorcas says when they break apart, foreheads still pressed together. “I’m sorry I just—freaked out like that. But I—I’m kind of gone over you Mar and for a second there you made me feel like maybe it was one sided and...I don’t know, it kinda broke my heart a bit. I didn’t give you a chance to explain because I didn’t think I could take hearing that I was just—an experiment for you or something. But that—that wasn’t fair.”

She kisses Marlene again, quick and sweet, like she can’t help herself.

“Gone over me huh?” Marlene asks, unable to keep the smile from spreading so widely across her face that her cheeks hurt.

“Oh shut-up,” Dorcas punches her playfully in the arm. “Did you hear anything else I said?”

“Nah not really,” Another kiss. All fast lips and tongues and teeth.

“We really need to find a better place for this than the library,” Dorcas breathes against her. Into her.

“Pretty sure there’s no one in our dorm room right now.”

“Well shit,” Dorcas leans back, already shoving books into her bag. “Move your ass McKinnon, I want you in a bed.”

Marlene laughs so loud she nearly gets detention.

PART III JAMES

James is dead on his feet. Has been for days. Maybe weeks, depending on how you think about it. He wasn’t in great shape before. He’s certainly in worse shape now. He pushes food around his plate, eating some of it, leaving most of it, pretending he can’t see the worried glances his friends keep sending him. Recently Remus has taken to slipping chocolates into his trouser pockets. Chocolate always makes Remus feel better after a full moon, or before one, really anytime, if James is being honest. Sirius has offered to let James borrow his leather jacket on the next Hogsmeade weekend. James knows that that jacket always makes Sirius feel grown-up and cool. And Peter, well, Peter put his rarest chocolate frog card on James’s pillow the other morning.

They’re idiots. All of them.

Beautiful, lovely, incredible idiots.

He wishes he could thank them.

Wishes he could pretend he was alright just so they would stop looking so worried. But he just...can’t quite...manage it. Right now every day feels like bleeding out. He swears he’s leaving pieces of himself on the walls and floors. Pooling in his bed. He keeps waiting for the wound to heal but every morning it tears itself open again, when he thinks about Regulus’s laugh or his eyes or the way he feels tucked into James’s side—warm and asleep and safe.

He pushes his plate away, the boys talking about something—Quidditch maybe, he's not sure. He reaches for the water jug, hating that his hands are shaky, hating that he feels sick and weak even though he is well aware that he is neither of those things. He takes a long drink, focusing on the feel of the water going down his throat, the coldness. Sometimes this helps, to shrink the world to a single sensation or actions. Makes it all easier to bear.

That's when he makes the mistake of looking up. Across the hall his eyes snag on cold grey. Regulus, standing right inside the door, staring at him. James feels his breath catch the moment their eyes meet. He expects Regulus to look away but he doesn't. And suddenly the world is out of focus except for this boy. James feels himself half rising out of his seat. He isn't even thinking he's just—pulled.

I love you.

I love you.

I love you.

I miss you.

I miss you.

I miss you.

I don't know how to do this without you anymore. I don't know what I'm supposed to look forward to without you.

“Mind if we join?”

James's head instantly snaps back to the table as he drops into his seat, no one seeming to have noticed that he'd risen at all.

“Of course,” Remus says as Mary, Marlene and Lily sit down with them, Lily across from James.

“Morning,” she gives him a weak smile.

“Er—“ he shifts slightly, looking over her shoulder. But he's met with an empty space. Regulus is gone. “Sorry,” he mutters, swallowing down his disappointment, trying not to let it show as he shoots Lily a pathetic imitation of his own smile. “Morning.”

Chapter End Notes

I'm sorry it's so late!

But I think it's actually a surprisingly sweet chapter no? Honestly, writing Marlene was so fun, like a nice breath of fresh air from all the angst!

Anyway, hope you liked it, love you all!

Chapter 41

Chapter Summary

"We've been waiting for you"

Chapter Notes

tw: violence / assault

tw: drinking (I realize I am bad at tagging for drinking, but I am gonna try to be better plus it feels a little bit messier in this chapter idk)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

PART I JAMES

Time passes.

James focuses on Quidditch.

On his exams.

Sometimes he sees Regulus—across the Great Hall, walking through the corridor—he tells himself they're coincidences, that he isn't looking for him. That he isn't purposely hanging around Regulus's classes or the hallways he knows he likes to take. Not that it matters. Regulus never sees him and James never says anything. They pass one another like strangers.

He talks to Regulus all the time in his head. He tells him about stupid things that don't matter, or things he thinks Regulus would find funny. He tells him that he misses him. That he loves him. He tries to stop but he can't, until eventually it feels like every thought he has is part of a one way conversation. Sometimes he imagines scenario's where they run into one another or get forced into detention together—somewhere that they have no choice but to talk. And for some reason that changes things, and suddenly Regulus decides to leave Slytherin and sleep in James's bed every night and come home with him at the end of the year.

Sometimes he hates Regulus a little bit. But only a little. Only on his worst days. When he lies awake at night and wishes he could rip the heart out of his fucking chest.

"Oi, captain hurry up!" Sirius shouts from downstairs. "You're gonna be late for your own bloody game!"

“I know, I know!” James is frantically tearing through his things, looking for his Quidditch gloves. Dragon hide, brown, water resistant, and with a grip that’s to die for. “Where the fuck did I put them,” he curses, yanking open the drawers in his bedside table.

He starts throwing things on the floor—the map ends up on his bed, some old quills clinking as he tosses them aside, a few letters from his mum...

“Where in the fuck,” he grumbles, now really starting to get annoyed. He yanks open the second drawer with such force that something heavy from the back slides forward, nearly falling out.

James freezes.

It’s a wooden box, shoved to the back during one of his many temper tantrum’s over the past few months.

For a moment he just stares at it, unable to move, or breathe, or think. His life has become a series of minefields. Faces he can’t see and words he can’t hear and things he doesn’t want to touch.

Slowly, he picks the box up, sinking onto the bed beside him as he holds it in his lap. The world suddenly shrinking. Becoming quiet. Reduced to no more than a tiny red ball. Carefully James takes it out, feeling the magic humming between his fingers. And there, when he turns it just right—

J & R

The sight of their initials entwined together sends a feeling so painful through his chest that James actually whimpers, fingers clutching more tightly around the ball.

Fuck.

This is not what he needs.

Not right now.

Not before the final Quidditch match of the year.

Not before he has to face him on the field.

“JAMES!” Sirius screams, loud enough that McGonagall probably hears him. “Your bloody parents are waiting for us!”

“C—“ his voice comes out strangled and choked and he has to stop, clearing his throat.

“Coming!” he manages on the second try. He throws the box back in its drawer, slamming it shut. Sometimes it’s like he gets so sad he gets angry. Like he just wants to break everything. He’s never felt like that before—never been the type to punch walls.

It’s scary if he’s being honest.

He's not sure where its come from.

Or how to handle it.

He knows Sirius has noticed. Remus. Peter. Knows it scares them too.

James closes his eyes, exhaling, trying to calm himself down. He can't lose it right now, there are people counting on him. His parents have come for fuck's sake. He tries counting, that helps sometimes.

He hears the sound of feet on the stairs and quickly stands up, shoving his hands in his pockets to hide the fact that they're shaking. A second later Sirius swings through the door, he's dressed in his house scarf and a t-shirt with a lion's head on it that James is almost certain he got from Euphemia for Christmas.

"Dude?" is all he says.

"Yeah, sorry, can't find my fucking gloves."

Sirius's eyes drop to the massacre that their room has become. "Really tearing the place apart huh?" he doesn't sound annoyed, but then, cleanliness has never been Sirius's number one priority.

"Sorry," James says anyway, because his mind is moving just a fraction too slowly at the moment.

"Don't apologize to me mate, Moony on the other hand—he might have your head for this."

"I'll buy him some chocolate to make up for it. C'mon, lets go."

Sirius sends James a curious look as he watches him make his way through the obstacle course their room has become.

"Your gloves?" Sirius asks, but James waves him off pushing him through the door.

"Fuck it. I don't need gloves to crush Slytherin."

Sirius laughs, throwing his arm around James's shoulders as they make their way into the common room. "That's the spirit!"

It's a good game.

James's favourite kind.

The stakes are too high for Slytherin to fuck around the way they normally do. The hits are aggressive but not illegal, the plays inching close to dirty but never crossing that line. They want this.

But James wants it too.

The scoring is neck in neck, no team ever ahead by more than one goal. James has to give it to the Slytherin Chasers, even if he does hate their guts, they know what they're doing.

"Macdonald!" James shouts, dipping under one Slytherin as two more come his way. He doesn't have time to check that she's in position just has to hope, chucking the Quaffle over his shoulder and taking a deep dive to avoid the Bludger that's been shot at him from the left. Judging by the cheers roaring up through the Gryffindor stands, the Quaffle finds its target.

James gets back on track, speeding towards the Slytherin hoops, catching up to Mary who's dodging the opposing team left and right. Their eyes lock for only a second but that's all James needs to know what's coming. She passes back to him, surprising the Slytherins who hadn't realized he'd caught up. The rough leather of the Quaffle scrapes against his naked hands as he latches onto it and speeds towards the goal now with a slight lead.

"You're gonna fucking choke Potter!" shouts the Slytherin Keeper. But James only smiles.

Not. Bloody. Likely.

He thinks about it for no more than a second, eyes bouncing to each empty corner and then back to the goal minder. James knows which way he's going to dive. He can just feel it. So he shoots.

"ANOTHER GOAL FOR GRYFFINDOR" the amplified voice fills up the arena along with the cheering of pretty well every house except Slytherin. "That brings the game back to a tie folks."

Mary crashes into him, nearly knocking him off his broom. "We're gonna beat them," she hisses.

James grins back at her, feeling better than he has in months. "Hell yeah we are."

Marlene pulls up beside them, knocking her shoulder against James's. "That was brilliant you two."

"Fucking pro material it was," Mary's eyes are bright, cheeks flushed from the wind and the adrenaline. She looks like a goddamn conquerer.

"I'm gonna get us that Snitch, I promise."

James taps the end of his broom to Marlene's. "I know you will," he says, just as Hooch blows the whistle letting them know the Quaffle is back in play.

The game doesn't get any easier. Neither team willing to give up ground. There are a few close calls but twenty minutes passes with no goals on either side. The crowd is getting restless and so are the players. James can't remember an instance of the last game of the season being a tie. He has no idea what the protocol is.

He's on the move, Quaffle under his arm, he passes to Mary but it gets intercepted. "Fuck," he hisses, turning his broom around and heading back towards his own goal. That's when he sees it.

The Snitch.

For a second James is frozen. It's not close to him, not by any stretch, and as soon as he starts going for it people will notice, but it's not like he can get Marlene's attention without giving everything away.

It feels like he's hovering there in the air for hours, but it must only be seconds because nobody seems to catch on. And then Regulus appears. If he notices James he doesn't show it, just hovers in the air near the Snitch, staring at it. James feels his heart sink. They were so close. They played such a good game. And now they're going to lose.

Except Regulus doesn't move.

Like James, he seems paralyzed by the sight of the Snitch.

And then—

And then—

He turns away.

"What the fu—"

James doesn't even have time to finish his curse before Marlene swoops in and snatches the ball. And then it's pandemonium. Horns and cheering, bodies crashing into him.

"Gryffindor has caught the Snitch!" the voice fills up the stadium. "They've won the game!"

James feels numb when he eventually lands back on the field. People are talking to him he's sure, but he can't hear them. Can't hear anything really. Somehow, in the chaos of people—students running onto the field, teachers, players, everyone mixing—he spots Regulus. By himself. Heading towards the locker rooms.

James drops his broom and starts walking. Blood boiling the closer he gets, hands in fists at his sides. He doesn't really have a plan. He's just so fucking angry. Because James knows they didn't win, knows that it's a lie, and what the hell is he supposed to do with that? Except pretend that he doesn't. Pretend that he didn't see what he saw. Somehow Regulus has managed to find a way to turn James into a liar. Again. What the hell kind of game is he playing anyway? Why can't he just—just—why does he have to twist everything in James's life into knots?

He's so angry that by the time he reaches Regulus he can't stop himself from shoving him, hard in the back.

"What the fuck was that?" James demands.

Regulus stumbles forward before turning around, expression, predictably, blank.

“Congratulations Potter,” he says flatly, which only succeeds in pissing James off more.

“Fuck you,” he snarls. “You fucking threw that game,” he jabs his hand at the sky.

Regulus arches his brow. “You have so little faith in your own team? Don’t think they could beat us without my help?”

James is shaking. “I saw you,” he hisses, if this surprises Regulus he doesn’t react. “I saw you turn away.”

There’s a long moment of silence, James’s chest heaving. He has no idea what is happening in the rest of the stadium or if anyone has noticed them. He can’t bring himself to care.

Eventually Regulus shrugs. “You wanted this,” he nods in the direction of the celebrations behind them. “And I could give it to you. This, at least, I could give to you.”

James has never wanted to scream so badly in his entire life.

“Fuck you,” he says instead, giving Regulus another shove, voice thick with everything that sits between them. “Fuck you, fuck you, fuck you.” He punctuates every curse with a push—they aren’t hard, aren’t meant to hurt, not really.

“James,” Regulus says quietly, and James thinks it’s been ages since he’s heard Regulus use his first name. Regulus wraps his hands around James’s wrists, holding them to his chest, both of them breathing heavy. Despite his calm exterior James can feel Regulus’s pulse pounding against his ribs.

“You think I care about a stupid Quidditch game?” James demands, fingers curling up in Regulus’s shirt like they can’t help themselves. Desperate to touch and hold and take. “I didn’t want this,” he’s so confused, so wrapped up in his pain that he can’t see anything else. “I wanted you. Why couldn’t you give me you?” his voice breaks and finally he sees Regulus’s mask give—sees the heartbreak in his eyes.

Oh thank God, he thinks.

Oh thank God I’m not alone in this.

Regulus looks like he’s going to speak but it’s then that a new set of hands grabs hold of James, yanking him back, and suddenly the world around them comes into focus again.

There’s people and yelling and then Madam Hooch is there.

“I have never seen such a display of poor sportsmanship in my life!” she’s yelling at James. He tries to find Regulus, but he can’t see him through the crowd of people now surrounding him.

No, his thoughts whine.

No, please.

Don't take him away yet.

"Twenty points from Gryffindor," Madam Hooch says, bringing his attention back to her. Mary—who must be standing nearby—lets out an indignant noise.

"And detention," Madam Hooch goes on.

James is barely paying attention, still struggling to see Regulus so he can—he can—fuck. What can he do? Here? Surrounded by a literal stadium of people. By his—

"Oh shit," he hisses under his breath, suddenly looking up at the crowd. "Oh shit my parents are here."

"Mr. Potter!" Madam Hooch says sternly. "Do you understand?"

James blinks. "Er—yes. Sure. Points. Detention. Got it."

Everything on the field is still chaos, there are too many people yelling and James can't tell if they're angry or celebrating, the inside of his head no better. Half of it occupied with the dread of facing his parents after the spectacle he just caused, the other replying the look in Regulus's eyes over and over again. The way his voice had grown soft when he'd said James's name.

"C'mon James," he feels a steadying hand on his shoulder and turns to find Marlene. She gives him a look somewhere between pitying and sympathetic. He has no idea what she knows or what she thinks she's just seen, but he doesn't push her away.

"Lets get you to the locker room okay?"

He nods dully, allowing himself to be guided through the celebrations and into the quiet building beyond.

He takes a long shower.

Hot.

It is not a coincidence that the locker room is empty when he gets out. He wanted it. Skin growing raw as he counted steps and door slams, waiting for his team to disappear.

He dresses quickly but doesn't leave, sitting on the bench afterwards, elbows on his knees, hands clasped, head hanging. He doesn't want to move. Doesn't want to face anything outside this room. Is pretty sure he'll fall apart if he does.

When he hears the door open he nearly screams at whoever it is to get the fuck out. Turns out to be a good thing he holds his tongue.

“Well,” he hears his mother’s voice and instantly winces. “That was quite the show.”

James would really rather not talk about it so instead he asks; “Dad?”

There’s a pause that’s just a second too long. “He had to leave about halfway through, work.”

“Ah,” James says, holding back a dry laugh. “Of course.”

He hears her walk over, sees her sit next to him out of the corner of his eye. “He told me to tell you that he’s proud of you.”

That sounds like a joke considering how things ended, but James doesn’t point that out. “He didn’t even watch us win.”

“James,” she says, sounding every bit like the mother she is. “You don’t need to win to make him proud. You know he doesn’t care.”

That last sentence hurts in a way that it’s not supposed to. Because what she means is that his father doesn’t care if he wins. But he’s long suspected that perhaps that’s because his father just doesn’t care at all. About him. At least, not enough. Certainly not enough to sit through a whole Quidditch match.

He hates himself for thinking that.

It isn’t fair. He knows it isn’t.

His parents love him.

His father’s work is important.

There’s a war on.

James is ungrateful.

“Oh hey,” his mother coos, warm hand rubbing between his shoulder blades “Honey what is it? What’s wrong?”

He doesn’t know what he’s done to make her sound like that—so concerned—doesn’t know how to stop it.

“I’ve done everything wrong,” he finally manages, voice small and full of holes. Like something’s been eating at it.

“James,” she says softly. “You are aware you just won the season?”

He only shakes his head, trying desperately to shove the sobs climbing up his throat back into his stomach. They sit for a long moment in silence, his mother’s hand still making slow, soothing circles against his back.

“I let him down mum,” he says finally, even though he knows he isn’t making any sense. Maybe she’ll think he’s talking about his father. Maybe he is. “And it hurts,” he’s crying now. Pathetic. “It hurts so much.”

His mother’s hand slides from his back to his shoulder, pulling him into her. He goes willingly, allowing himself to be held, his mother kissing the top of his head before squeezing him tight.

“You are only one person James,” she practically whispers. “Only one boy. You can’t expect yourself to be everything for everyone all of the time. It isn’t fair,” she kisses him again, letting another silence stretch between them before she speaks; “Did you tell him?”

Maybe his mother does know who he’s talking about. It wouldn’t be surprising really. Somehow she always does.

James snuffles. “Tell him what?”

She squeezes him again. “How much he means to you?”

I love you, Regulus.

I love you, Regulus.

I love you.

“Yeah,” he croaks. “Yeah I told him. He knows.”

He feels his mother nod. “Then you didn’t let him down.”

As if it’s that simple. As if it ever could be.

“He won’t leave.”

“I know,” his mother says softly.

“I begged him to. I fucking begged him to.”

“I know.”

His voice is thick and ugly. “I hate him for staying.”

She kisses his temple, his forehead, his cheek. “You’re allowed to hate people when they’ve hurt you,” she says. “Even the people you love.”

I love you Regulus.

I love you Regulus.

I love you.

James pulls away from his mother, scrubbing at his face until it stings and then dropping his head back against the lockers behind him, sighing as he looks up at the ceiling.

“Will it always be like this?” he asks finally.

His mother takes her time answering.

“Not like this, no,” she says eventually. Delicately.

But James hears the answer hidden under her words. “But it will always hurt?”

She nods. “Like pressing on a bruise.”

He laughs. It’s empty and cold and foreign. “I don’t want him to be a bruise,” he says without thinking, not allowing himself a moment to process the fact that he’s currently discussing his break-up with Regulus Black with his mum.

“Well,” she says after several moments, reaching out and squeezing his hand. James looks over at her, meeting her bright eyes, and she smiles—if not a little sadly. “Maybe life will surprise you. Maybe he won’t be.”

PART II REMUS

“Do you think we’re supposed to be doing something right now?” Lily asks from beside Remus, cup full of some dark Muggle liquid Mary’s older brother managed to owl them.

Remus arches his brow. “Doing something? Like what exactly?”

Quidditch celebrations were delayed so that they could coincide with the last day of classes. Two parties, one night. The Gryffindor common room is out of control.

“You know,” she gestures at the general revelries. “We are Prefects.”

Remus snorts, looking over at her. The pair are leaning against the wall closest to the stairs. Remus pleasantly tipsy but not too drunk. “You feel like being a Prefect right now?”

Lily doesn’t manage to keep from smiling. “Not really, no.”

“Well then, there’s your answer.”

Across the room Sirius is currently attempting to get Peter laid. Not that that’s an impossible task, Peter really isn’t bad looking—a bit cherub-y maybe, but not bad. However, he is currently reaching above his station.

“He doesn’t really think that’s going to work does he?” Lily asks, following Remus’s gaze.

He only shrugs. “Never underestimate Sirius.”

“Well sure, if it was Sirius trying to get with her but...”

“Sirius is a very skilled wingman,” he says, watching the boy in question pull out his most charming smile, arm slung around Peter’s shoulders, subtly pushing him closer to the girl he’s chatting up.

Lily scoffs. “No one is that skilled.”

Remus looks over at her, amused. “I would have figured you for a personality first, looks second, kind of person.”

Lily rolls her eyes. “In an ideal world sure.”

“An ideal world but not this one?”

“I’m just saying, it’s naive to think that people don’t care about how you look,” there’s a pause and then, in a rather forced casual tone Lily goes on; “Take James for example.”

Remus arches his brow. “James?” he asks curiously.

“He was hounding me to go on a date with him before we’d even had two full conversations with one another, he had no idea who I was. He just liked my...face.” The tops of her cheeks have gone pink and as she sips determinedly on her drink Remus wonders if she’s had maybe a little bit more than he’d realized.

“James was hounding you to go on a date with him when he was eleven years old,” Remus says eventually. “He had no idea who HE was.”

“Exactly!” Lily says emphatically. “All looks.”

Remus appraises her for a moment, biting his lower lip, wondering if he shouldn’t just let this conversation go. “It wasn’t though.”

Lily looks over at him, brow furrowed. “What wasn’t?”

“James’s thing for you—it wasn’t all looks.”

Something weird twists up her face and she drops her eyes down to her cup but doesn’t drink. After a few seconds she laughs.

“I know,” she says finally. And then, shaking her head and looking back up. “You know what that bastard said to me? Said right to my face?”

Yup. Definitely drunk.

“What?” Remus asks, unable to help himself.

“He said: ‘You’re a fucking force Lily Evans and you always have been,’ she does a rather spot on impression of James, Remus can’t help but think, “trying to get your attention was like chasing after a storm—terrifying and exhilarating and unbelievable every time.” She lets out a deep breath.

“Wow,” Remus says, not sure what else there is.

“Right? I mean—right?!”

“When did he say that exactly?”

Lily waves a dismissive hand. “Last summer.”

Remus feels his brow raise. He hadn’t expected that. He would have thought—what with Regulus...His eyes start subconsciously scanning the room for James but he doesn’t find him. He’s been making himself scarce recently. Remus has given him space, forced Sirius and Peter to do the same, but at some point they’re going to have to talk to him. They can’t let him wallow forever.

“I mean, how can he say that,” Lily goes on, pulling Remus back to the present. “How can he say that and then not—not—“ she looks pleadingly at Remus who feels his heart ache for her.

“I don’t know,” he says honestly. What exactly it is that James feels for Lily—or felt for Lily—Remus has never been able to parcel out. Even at the time, it was a constant back and forth between does he or doesn’t he. Does he mean it? Does he love her? Or is it all just a laugh? It was hard to tell with James back then.

Remus is about to say something a little more comforting—or at least he hopes he is—when suddenly Lily’s eyes go wide and she nearly drops her cup. “Holy shit!”

“What?” Remus demands, looking around, trying to follow her gaze. “What is it?”

“Holy shit,” she’s smiling again, which Remus takes as a good sign. “He actually did it.”

And that’s when Remus spots it—Peter sucking face.

“Ew,” he can’t help but say, causing Lily to giggle beside him.

“Did you just say ew?” comes another voice that instantly sparks something hot in the pit of Remus’s stomach. “That’s some of my finest work that is,” Sirius is grinning as he leans next to Remus, practically pressing their bodies together.

“Evening Evans,” he tips his head to Lily who rolls her eyes.

“I can’t believe you managed that.”

“What can I say, I’m endlessly talented.”

“You’re a something alright,” Remus says, earning him a pinch to the side.

Lily just shakes her head. “Oh my god—is she crawling into his lap?”

“That’s my boy,” Sirius says like a proud parent, wiping a non-existent tear from his face. “They grow up so fast. One minute they’re standing awkwardly in the corner too afraid to talk to anyone and the next they’re—”

“Oh please, no more play by plays,” Remus whines, looking very pointedly anywhere but in Peter’s direction. “I don’t need the mental images.”

They’re standing so close that when Sirius turns to Remus his lips brush his temple. “Come on Remus, don’t play the nun with me. I know what kind of mental images you have.”

Despite himself Remus shivers, Sirius’s hot breath snaking down his neck. He smells like alcohol. He smells like late nights and poor decisions and mouths that love to devour.

“And that,” Lily says, downing the rest of her drink and throwing a smirk Remus’s way, “is my cue. G’night boys.”

“No, Lily you don’t have to—“

“See y’ah ginger,” Sirius cuts over him, causing Lily to throw-up the middle finger as she walks off into the crowded room.

“Your manners, Master Black, are atrocious,” Remus does his best impression of Sirius’s posh accent.

Sirius snorts, nuzzling against Remus’s neck. It’s more affectionate than they usually are in public, but no one’s paying attention, and Sirius isn’t exactly famous for keeping his hands to himself.

“Are you sure you have to go home?” he asks, voice tickling Remus’s skin.

“Just for a bit,” he says, unable to stop himself from leaning into Sirius’s heat.

James, of course, has offered Remus a room at his house for the summer. Or, well, his mum offered him a room, James and Sirius made several crude jokes about exactly where they expected Remus would be sleeping. Remus accepted of course, but he still wants to go home first. Just for a week. He hasn’t been there since—since his mother died. And part of him feels like he needs to. Like he’ll never fully be able to accept that she’s gone until he walks into that house and finds it empty. Finds the kitchen gathering dust. He wants to be the one to pack up her stuff, not his father. He wants to say goodbye.

“Hey,” Sirius nudges him lightly and Remus blinks, coming back to the present. “You okay?”

“Yeah,” Remus smiles at him. “Yeah, sorry, my head just...but I’m okay,” he presses further into Sirius, feeling a little reckless. “I’m perfect actually.” He watches Sirius’s eyes drop to his lips.

“Give me some of your drink,” Sirius says after a long pause, voice low. “I lost mine.”

Remus rolls his eyes, holding the cup out to him, “Not that you need it,” he adds.

But Sirius doesn’t move, instead, making direct eye contact, he parts his lips and waits. Remus feels his breath hitch as he stares at Sirius Black—beautiful, and wicked, and pliant. His hand actually trembles slightly when he lifts the cup to Sirius’s mouth, eyes dropping momentarily to the bobbing of Sirius’s throat.

When Sirius finally pulls back he runs his tongue along his lower lip—Remus swears it happens in slow motion.

“You’re obscene,” it’s meant to sound teasing but it doesn’t. Instead it sounds hungry.

Sirius leans forward again, eyes sparkling, their noses nearly touching. “I want you.”

Another shiver runs through Remus. “Well,” he says, impressed by the steadiness of his voice, “unfortunately for you, I’m very hard to get.”

Sirius’s lips twitch up. “Oh I know. But I intend to work for it.”

Remus’s skin feels burning hot, nerve endings crackling up and down his bones. He has to close his eyes just to give one of his senses a rest. “Oh,” is all he manages to get out. Barely a word. More a breath. He feels Sirius’s fingers circling his wrist, his thumb rubbing against Remus’s pulse. The touch is delicate, feather light, and Remus feels overwhelmed by it.

“I love you,” he whispers, because in that moment he feels it so strongly that he can’t help himself.

“I love you too,” thumb still playing with Remus’s pulse. “Come to bed with me.”

Remus opens his eyes, turning to meet Sirius’s. “The others—“

“The room is empty.” Not that that’s ever stopped them before. “Come to bed with me Remus,” Sirius asks again, letting go of Remus, the loss almost enough to make him whine as he watches Sirius make his way slowly up the stairs. Some days he thinks he’s trapped inside one of his fantasies, the ones he felt so guilty about at twelve or thirteen. When he would imagine what it would be like, to be wanted back. He never thought he was living the kind of life where Sirius Black could be his. He’s terrified every second that he’ll wake up. That one day he’ll look beside him and Sirius won’t be there. Remus has survived a werewolf attack, the death of his mother, the neglect of his father. But losing Sirius?

That would destroy him.

PART III LILY

She’s probably had too much to drink. Not in a concerning way just—she knows if she wasn’t feeling so stressed about...everything, she wouldn’t have had so much.

On the one hand she’s desperate to get home. To see her mum, to hold her and touch her and know for certain that she’s alright. To be able to really find out what’s going on and how bad it is and how her doctors are treating her. Mary thinks that if they can find out more about the Muggle treatments it might help them figure out how magic can help. Lily isn’t convinced but it’s as good an idea as any.

On the other hand, there’s a part of Lily that dreads going back. Dreads the feeling of being stuck, without her magic, without her friends, constantly lying about what she’s been up to all

year. Pretending all the time—that magic isn’t real, that she doesn’t know who she is. And then there’s Sev. They haven’t talked, not since Mary’s attack, but...things between them are always messier at home. When all the other noise drifts away. Losing him hurts more there.

“I need some air,” she murmurs to no one in particular. Mary is busy chatting up some seventh year Hufflepuff and Dorcas and Marlene have found themselves a corner where they are draped all over each other in a manner that is not believably platonic. Lily doesn’t really have a plan as she stumbles out into the hallway. It’s after curfew but seeing as it’s the last day of term she knows most of the professors will go easy on her—I mean, it’s not as though they can give her a detention. The only person she really has to look out for is Filch.

She drags her hand along the cold stone walls as she walks. She wants to go outside, she decides. Wants to feel the crisp early summer night. Wants to look at the stars. It’s that last thought, she imagines, that sends her off towards the Astronomy Tower. A mistake. By the time she reaches the top she is feeling miserably sober—out of breath and sweating off all the alcohol she drank.

Outside the cold breeze brushes against her hot skin—a shock to the system. Though not as much of a shock as the presence of James Potter, who whips around the moment the door closes behind her, eyes bright and wide in the dark. His expression dims instantly when he sees her.

“Waiting for someone?” she asks, standing still in front of the door, feeling a horrible ache in her chest. Jesus, did she really just walk in on James Potter waiting for his hook-up? What exactly is it that the universe has against her?

James snorts, swaying slightly, and that’s when she notices the bottle clutched in his right hand. Apparently she isn’t the only one who’s been drinking her feelings tonight.

“Not really waiting, no,” he says, turning back towards the night sky.

After a few seconds of uncertainty Lily steps forward, coming to stand beside him. “Hoping for someone then?” she asks, knowing all too well how that feels.

He smiles dryly, lifting the bottle up and taking a good swig. “Maybe—yeah actually, I suppose that’s about right.”

Lily nods, following his gaze off into the distance. “Well, I’m sorry then, that’s it’s only me.” Oof, this feels terrible. She should really go back inside.

James lets out a bemused laugh. “Only you? You’re Lily Evans,” he says, slurring a little. Lily waits for him to continue but he doesn’t.

“I don’t know what that means,” she says finally.

“No,” he nods to himself. “You wouldn’t.” He takes another swig from his bottle before handing it over to her, she takes it automatically—it’s practically a reflex.

“What even is this?” she asks, turning the bottle around in her hands. She tries to read the label but it’s all in Latin.

“No idea,” James says. “The house elves nicked it for me. Tastes vile but it’s fucking strong.”

“Tempting,” Lily says, handing it back. “But I think I’ll pass.”

James arches his brow but doesn’t push, swallowing another mouthful without flinching.

“Maybe we should take a step back yeah?” Lily says, wearily eyeing the edge of the tower. She’s in no shape to be babysitting a drunk and reckless James Potter. Predictably, he only grins at her.

“Worried about me Evans?”

“Always,” she says without thinking, instantly feeling her cheeks heat up as she looks out into the night, avoiding James’s stare. “Seeing as you’re such a fucking idiot and all,” she’s not sure she even convinces herself with that one. “Don’t know how Remus stands it.”

James snorts. “Me either, honestly.”

They’re quiet for a while. It isn’t uncomfortable even though it probably should be, maybe it’s the alcohol. The sky is clear tonight, stretching on endlessly in front of them, dark and smooth and sparkling with stars. Lily breathes in deep, letting the sweet air fill her lungs. She isn’t planning on saying anything. She doesn’t even really know where the words come from, they just sort of...tumble out of her.

“I think my mum’s dying.”

Saying that out loud feels simultaneously good and awful at the same time. Good, because the words have been hanging over her for weeks. Months. Since her mother first told her she was sick. Awful, because she wishes with her whole being that she could convince herself they aren’t true. That she’s being irrational. But the more her and Mary and Marlene fail to find any answers, and the more her mother’s letters refuse to talk about her health, the more Lily feels like she can’t avoid them.

James, she realizes eventually, is looking at her. He doesn’t speak for a few seconds and then abruptly shoves his bottle back into her hands.

“I—“

“Oh hell no,” James says. “There’s no way you aren’t drinking after that confession.”

Somehow Lily manages to laugh, bringing the bottle up to her mouth and instantly regretting it.

“Oh my God,” she coughs, shoving it back at him. “Oh my god that really is vile.”

James smiles a little. “You get used to it.”

“Are you sure it’s fit for humans?” she spits on the ground, trying to get the taste out of her mouth. “There is no way that’s good for you.”

“Oh sorry, you put flaming tar sticks in your mouth and suddenly you’re concerned with your health?”

“Flaming tar sticks?” now she’s laughing and choking. “You sound like my mum.”

To his credit, James only lets it be awkward for about a second. Maybe even less than that.

“I’m taking that as a compliment,” he says, words gentle.

Lily sighs, wiping at her face and looking up at him, the moonlight reflecting in his glasses. “You should.”

James’s face grows more serious, his eyes soft. “Is there anything I can do?”

“About my mum dying?” it must be the alcohol letting her say that out loud without flinching.

“Yeah.”

Lily swallows. She wants desperately for there to be. For James to write another letter and magically solve her problems. But she knows this isn’t that simple.

“I don’t think so,” she says finally, giving him a weak smile. “But thank you, for wanting to.”

“You’ll tell me?” he says, so earnest it almost hurts. “If I can? If there comes a time…”

She looks back at him with a reckless amount of affection. “I’ll tell you.”

He nods, staring out at the sky. Looking at him, Lily can see the bags under his eyes, the frown lines near the ends of his mouth where they never were before. She can’t help but think of that day he found her freaking out in the snow. About the look on his face. And suddenly she’s hit with how strange it is that James Potter is hiding out here when there’s a party going on. Something he’d normally be the centre of, however obnoxiously.

After a few more moments of silence she nudges him with her elbow. “You wanna tell me what’s going on with you?”

He lets out a dry laugh. “My problems are pretty insignificant compared to yours.”

Lily frowns. “I don’t think so.”

He looks at her out of the corner of his eyes. “You don’t even know what they are.”

“If they hurt they hurt,” she shrugs. “Pain isn’t a competition.”

“Mmm,” James says, like he doesn’t quite believe her. Eventually he sighs, letting something go as he closes his eyes. “I’m a little heartbroken at the moment, if I’m being honest.”

“Ah,” Lily says, swallowing down whatever those words drag up in her. “That’s who you were hoping for then?” she asks, gesturing towards the door even though he can’t see her.

“Yeah,” his voice is a little rough. “I spend a lot of time hoping for...people these days.”

“I’m sorry,” she says, because it seems like the right thing to say. “It’s an awful feeling, heartbreak.”

“You’d think I’d be used to by now.” He gives her a sidelong look that has her rolling her eyes.

“I’m feeling attacked,” she teases, causing James to snort.

“Not an attack.”

“I don’t know, kinda felt like one.”

He looks over at her. “You gonna make me apologize for having my heartbroken by you Lily Evans?” there’s amusement in his eyes, along with the sadness. Her throat feels tight.

“No,” she says finally, offering him a shaky smile. “Knowing you, you’d make a big production of it.”

James laughs. “Probably—get the choir to sing to you at breakfast or something.”

“I’m pretty sure you actually did do that to me once.”

“Did not!”

“Did too! And they were bloody off-key the whole time.”

“To be fair, that’s hardly my fault.”

“I’m just saying, you could have held auditions. I mean, if you’re going to be an annoying prat at least put the effort in.”

James is still laughing. “If anything, them being off-key makes it funnier.”

“For you maybe,” Lily says. “I’m the one who had to listen to them for an hour, put me off my beans on toast.”

“Now that really is a tragedy.”

Lily nods gravely, barely able to hold back her smile. “Tell me about it.”

There’s something warm in James’s eyes when she meets them again, something that reaches inside her chest and squeezes her heart.

“Thank you,” he says finally, voice quiet.

Lily quirks her eyebrow up. “For what?”

He shrugs. “I was having a really shit night before you came along.”

Lily tries and fails not to read too much into that, not to let her heart stutter and the butterflies in her stomach start to flap their wings. She swallows.

“Glad I could help.”

PART III MARY

Mary Macdonald prides herself on many things, but first and foremost is her ability to slip out of a boy’s dorm room with exceptional stealth, and, if she may say so herself, poise. It’s early, the sun only just warming up the sky, streaking pink and orange across the corridor as she makes her way back to Gryffindor Tower from the Hufflepuff dorms. She stops by the kitchens on her way, grabbing a quick bite to eat since she fully intends to sleep through breakfast.

An older girl taught her a spell for freshening up her make-up back when she was in second year. She knows one for hair too but there’s something about “just-shagged-hair” that Mary actually rather likes. She peeks at her reflection in one of the windows she passes and smirks. She hopes she runs into someone before she gets back to her room because she is looking unbelievably hot at the moment and it would be a shame if no one else got to see it.

Of course, she regrets that thought as soon as she hears the nasally voice calling out behind her.

“Oi slut!”

Mary rolls her eyes. “Are you stalking me now Barty? This really is getting pathetic.”

She doesn’t turn around but she does slide her wand into her palm. She knows what’s coming next. She can feel it. He won’t want to waste time, not after what happened before. Not now that they’re alone.

“Petrific—“

“Expelliarmus,” she snaps before he can finish. She catches his flying wand in her empty hand, the outrage on his face almost comical. “Come now Barty, if you want to get me you’re gonna have to try a little harder than that. I mean, Petrificus Totalus? What are we, first years? I can’t imagine that would impress your big bad Lord, now would it?”

His face clouds over and he steps closer, jabbing his finger at her. “Don’t you dare speak of him.”

Mary bats her eyelashes. “Why ever not? I hear he has loads to say about me.”

“You fucking wish.”

“Oh but he does,” she goes on in a sickly sweet voice. “Mudbloods are ruining this, and Mudbloods are tarnishing that, and oh the Mudbloods are going to steal all our magic.”

“Shut your fucking mouth.”

Mary actually laughs. “I’m sorry, what exactly is it that I said that is so offensive to you?”

He growls, eyes burning with rage. “It’s your disrespect.”

“My disrespect?” she asks. “And who exactly am I meant to respect,” her eyes run him up and down. “You?”

She should see it coming. She doesn’t. But she should.

In the blink of an eye Barty moves, one hand grabbing her by the throat and the other taking hold of her arm, slamming her wrist into the stone wall behind her until the wands fall from her hand. She struggles against him until his grip on her throat tightens. Mary has never been properly choked before, never gasped for breath and found none there. The burning fear it sends through her whole body is overwhelming. But Barty doesn’t let up, pinning her to the wall and squeezing, squeezing, squeezing.

He’s too big for her to throw off, especially like this. He’s not even that strong but he’s still stronger and she can’t use her fucking wand, can’t level the uneven biological playing field.

“Listen cunt,” he snarls, close enough that she can feel his spittle on her cheek. “I know you feel real safe, but one day you and your friends will have to leave this place, and when we meet outside these walls things are gonna be different.” He tightens his fingers and Mary is pretty sure she’s screaming. Or she would be if she had any air.

“When we meet in the real world I am going to royally fuck everything you care about, and I am going to make you watch while I do it, make you witness the carnage before I cut you open and spill you out at the Dark Lord’s feet.”

She can’t breathe.

Can’t breathe.

Can’t breathe.

Jesus it hurts, her lungs are fucking burning. She didn’t know suffocating would feel like this, like someone set her chest on fire.

Her vision is bouncing around, in and out of focus, but she still sees it, the moment he leans forward and god she wishes she had the strength to do something. Anything. Wishes she could turn away. But all she can do is watch as he presses his mouth to the exact spot she left the lipstick mark on his cheek.

When he pulls back there is a sick glint in his eyes. “You will never be rid of me,” he says in a low voice. And then, just as her vision becomes more black spots than anything else, his hand disappears.

Mary crumples to the ground, gasping and choking, lungs trying to suck in air too fast for their own good. The world spins, her body shaking like there are earthquakes under her skin.

Distantly, she hears Barty laugh as he walks away.

PART IV REGULUS

Regulus doesn't see James after the Quidditch match. He's no longer in the hallways outside of his classrooms, or mysteriously walking down to the Great Hall at the same time as him in the mornings. It hurts more than it should, losing those small moments of connection. Knowing that James is slowly letting him go more and more.

In his weaker moments Regulus imagines walking up to the Gryffindor common room and demanding to see him. Or crossing the Great Hall and kissing him senseless right there in front of everyone. They're ridiculous thoughts of course, but he holds onto them anyway.

For the first time in his life there's some sense of relief when he crosses the threshold of Grimmauld Place. Unlike Hogwarts these walls are not a reminder of everything he has lost. Of the life he pretended he could have. They are his reality. His past present and future. That used to hurt more, used to make him feel trapped, used to make him want to scream. But he's had his taste now, of the light that exists outside these walls, maybe he can finally let it go.

"Come in," his mother says flatly when he knocks on the door of her study. "Ah," her eyes flick up and then back down to the parchment in front of her, "you're back."

"Yes," he says, shoulders pulled down and hands clasped behind him. "I wanted to speak with you."

Walburga's eyes flick up again, pausing slightly longer this time as though trying to read his thoughts. He knows she isn't actually trying to read them of course, he would feel it if she was. She turns back to her papers, scribbling for a few more minutes before she eventually places her quill down and gives him her undivided attention.

"Yes, go on. What is it Regulus?"

For a moment, just a moment, the words stick in his throat.

I love you Regulus.

I love you Regulus.

I love you.

He coughs. "I don't wish to return to Hogwarts next year." Walburga raises her brow so Regulus quickly continues. "I believe I've learned all I can there, and I'm ready to commit myself fully to the Dark Lord. To take my place at your sides." Why bother pretending anymore? This is the path he has chosen. The one he was born for. The one he deserves. No reason to torture himself anymore with the person he wishes he was.

After a few seconds of silence Walburga rises from her chair and it is only years of training that keeps Regulus from flinching as she draws near, thin, pale fingers reaching for his face, cradling it in her palms.

He is terrified.

But he does not pull away.

And then, she does something he never expected, something he's not sure he's ever seen—she smiles.

“Oh my son,” she says, voice nearly soft. “We’ve been waiting for you.”

Chapter End Notes

Hello lovelies!

If fics had season finales this would be the season finale of this fic, everything kind of changes after this point so prepare yourselves!

I wanted to touch base with all the characters in this chapter (more or less) so hopefully that didn't feel too repetitive.

Thank you for all your lovely comments and messages and kudos, I know I've been a little bad at responding recently but I'm gonna get on that again!

Hope you're all doing swell :) :) :)

Chapter 42

Chapter Summary

Surprise???

Chapter Notes

tw / cw: alcohol

tw: referenced sexual assault (very very very vague reference)

FRENCH TRANSLATION IN END NOTES

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

TWO YEARS LATER

June 1979

PART I: JAMES

“You reckon he’s having a wank in there?”

James nearly snorts champagne out of his nose as Remus shoots Sirius a dirty look from across the room.

“Really?”

“What?” Sirius demands, holding his hands up innocently. “It’s a good stress reliever!”

“Jesus Christ.”

“Remus John Lupin, you cannot stand there and tell me orgasming doesn’t relax you because we both know that’s not true.”

“Ugh, can you not?” Peter makes a face.

Sirius looks over at him, eyebrow arched. “Can I not what? Make Moony orgasm? Sorry, basically second nature at this point.” He throws Remus a wink.

“I’m divorcing you,” Remus says flatly.

Sirius's grin only widens. "You'd have to marry me first sweetheart."

"One wedding at a time, alright boys?" James pushes himself off the couch and walks over to the bathroom where Frank has been hiding for the past forty-five minutes. He taps on the door lightly. "Frank?"

No response. He looks over at the others in time to see Sirius mouthing the word "wanking" at Remus who throws his arms up in exasperation.

"Frank? If you've gone and drowned yourself in the bathtub I'm gonna be pissed," James says, still getting no response. He counts to ten before sighing and pulling out his wand. "Okay, I'm opening the door, alright?" he warns as he points his wand at the lock, murmuring under his breath; "Please don't actually be wanking," and then; "Alohomora."

He hears a satisfying click but doesn't reach for the doorknob. He's not sure he's exactly who you want to be giving you your pre-wedding pep talk.

"Who's going in then?" he asks, looking hopefully over his shoulder only to find his three best friends staring blankly back at him. Remus actually steps further away from the bathroom.

"Well I mean," Sirius says casually. "You are already standing there."

James rolls his eyes. He should have stayed on the couch with the champagne. "You're rubbish mates you are."

Sirius gasps. "That is hurtful."

"Bit true though," Remus concedes, earning him a smack from Sirius.

James bites down on a smile because he is absolutely still annoyed with these idiots. "Will you lot shut-up? I'm about to have a very important heart to heart," he gestures at the door in front of him.

"Yes Mr. Potter, we'll be so good Mr. Potter, we'll follow all your rules Mr. Potter."

James glares at Sirius who only cackles. "As soon as I get Frank out of this bathroom I'm punching you in the face."

Sirius grins, reclining in the corner of the couch with a flute of champagne dangling from his hand, making him look every inch like the wealthy spoiled brat he is. "Promises, promises."

James rolls his eyes, turning back to the task at hand. He doesn't know much about weddings, but he's fairly certain you need at least two people for it to work. James opens the door to the bathroom cautiously, sliding in like he's expecting to have something jump out at him. Nothing does, obviously. Instead all he finds is Frank Longbottom sitting on the floor, head in his hands.

There's a moment of silence in which James has absolutely no idea what to say. Luckily, Frank doesn't let him suffer for long.

“Sorry,” the older boy mutters finally. He drops his hands, looking miserably up at James. “I don’t know what’s wrong with me.”

“Not that I have much experience with these things,” James says as he lowers himself down onto the floor next to Frank, back pressing into the tub. “But I’d say you’re acting pretty normally. Not exactly unheard of, is it? The groom freaking out right before the wedding?”

Frank groans. “I’m not getting cold feet.”

“Didn’t think you were,” James says, because he means it, despite all evidence to the contrary.

“I want to marry Alice,” he looks James right in the eye. His face, James notes, is paler than normal, his dark hair thoroughly dishevelled—they’ll have to do something about that. Not that he thinks they’ll be able to find a single comb between the five of them.

“That’s good,” he says, when Frank doesn’t go on, “considering we’re at your wedding.”

The older boy snorts. “It’s not the commitment or, I don’t know, some bullshit about losing my freedom. I wanna be with her, I always have.”

“Soooo...what’re you doing on the floor of the bathroom then?” James asks, as gently as he can.

Frank lets out a deep breath, pinching the bridge of his nose. “I’m worried that we’re... giving up.”

James blinks. Whatever he’d been expecting, it certainly wasn’t that. “What do you mean?” he asks.

Frank looks down at his hands, the expression on his face isn’t nervous or afraid but...tired. Exhausted. It’s been hard recently: more attacks, more disappearances, more deaths. And Alice and Frank have been in the thick of it the longest out of any of them.

“I don’t know if we would be doing this if things were different,” he says finally. “My mum says we’re too young and I reckon she’s probably right, which makes me think—makes me worry—that I asked Alice to marry me because I don’t believe we’re ever going to get any older. Because I don’t believe—“ his voice cracks and he takes in a shuddering breath. “Because I don’t believe we can win.”

James stares at Frank, suddenly wishing that Remus or Sirius had come in with him. Frank has always known what to do, as long as James has known him, he’s always been in charge of something. To have him look so fucking lost is making James feel off-kilter.

Eventually he swallows, knowing he has to say something. “You know what Alice said, when she told me you two were getting married?”

“Probably said that we were mad.”

James laughs and Frank actually manages to crack a smile. “Well, yeah, obviously. But after that,” James sobers up a little bit. “She said that when things get hard people make the mistake of thinking that love is a luxury. But it isn’t. It’s the most important thing—the only thing that matters. She said that if we wanna make it through this then we need to savour the things we love.”

Frank smiles weakly. “Sounds like Alice.”

“You aren’t giving up Frank,” James goes on, thinking of the fierce look in Alice’s eyes that night on the beach. “You’re surviving. There’s a difference.”

Frank holds his gaze for a moment before shaking his head and chuckling softly. “Merlin, I can’t believe I’m getting life advice from James bloody Potter.”

James smirks. “Imagine how I feel?” He gets to his feet, straightening out his robes before offering Frank his hand. The older boy only pauses for a moment before taking it.

“Thank you,” Frank squeezes James’s hand before letting go. “Really.”

James nods. “Of course. Now lets go see if we can find a comb yeah? Your hair looks worse than mine.”

Lily stands across from him during the ceremony with the rest of Alice’s bridesmaids. She cries halfway through the vows, face crinkling under her freckles in a way that James thinks should be illegal. When she catches him staring at her she sticks out her tongue and James has to bite down hard on his lip to hold in a laugh.

Rings are exchanged and promises are made and eventually Frank is pulling Alice into his arms and kissing her while he blubbers worse than Lily. James has never been to a wedding before, didn’t really think it would be his thing, but as he watches his friends pull apart, hands still grasping at one another like they’re afraid to let go, everyone else clapping and cheering—or, in Sirius’s case, barking—he can’t help but think that maybe they’re alright. After all, he hasn’t seen this many smiling faces in months.

“And voila!” Mary says as she slides back into her seat at their table with a tray of tequila shots.

“Merlin, I’m gonna die,” Dorcas mutters, eyes already looking hazy. In fact, the only one of them not currently showing signs of being absolutely plastered is Mary.

“No limes? Mary, what the hell?” Marlene demands.

“Limes are for the weak.”

Lily snorts, taking two shots and passing one to James. He arches his brow. “You gonna be able to stand after this?”

She gives him the finger. "Rich coming from you Potter, fucking lightweight."

Sirius snorts. "She's got you there."

"Oi! You're supposed to be MY best mate."

"I am," Sirius says easily. "And as your best mate I know better than anyone what a fucking lightweight you are."

"Amen," Lily turns around and the pair high-five.

"You guys aren't allowed to gang up on me."

"Aw," Lily coos. "You're cute when you're pouting."

James glares at her. "That's only like half a compliment."

"I'd say less than half honestly," Remus chimes in.

"Oh fuck off all of you, where's Peter? He's always nice to me."

"Actually, that's a good question," Remus starts looking around the event hall. "I haven't seen him in a while..."

"He's probably getting laid," Marlene says, earning a skeptical scoff from both James and Sirius. Remus shoots them a look.

"You two are too mean to him."

Sirius makes a disbelieving noise, sitting upright in his chair and clutching at his chest. "I am not mean."

"Eh," James says, earning him a scandalized look. "Listen mate, I'm sorry, but you can be kind of..."

"Kind of what?" Sirius sounds incredibly haughty when he wants to.

"Kind of a bitch," Mary finishes for him, causing Lily, Marlene and Dorcas to start giggling uncontrollably. "Enough talking, lets drink," she holds up her shot, gesturing impatiently for everyone else to do the same.

"To Alice and Frank!" Marlene sing-songs.

"Do you toast with shots?" Dorcas asks. "Doesn't seem like a toasting drink."

"You can toast with anything if you're loud enough," Mary says. And then; "To the never ending monotony of marriage."

Lily snorts. "Jesus Christ Mary."

“Ooh, ooh I want to do one!” Sirius chimes in, shimmying in his seat. “To the only lay Frank’s ever had!”

“No way!?” James asks.

“Yes way,” Sirius says, a bit too proud of himself for spilling that bit of gossip. “Our Alice deflowered the Quidditch captain.”

“I can’t take you anywhere,” Remus mutters under his breath, but he doesn’t quite manage to keep the fondness out of his tone.

“Well I toast to true love,” Dorcas says, words slurring slightly.

“Ugh, God, please don’t, you’re going to make me nauseous.” Mary makes a revolted face.

“Well I think it’s a cute toast,” Marlene says as her and Dorcas sway closer to one another, their noses nearly touching.

James notices the way it makes Sirius stiffen, makes his eyes dart around the room. Alice and Frank are both from old Pureblood families, meaning there are a lot of people milling about who might not look kindly on any relationship not likely to produce an heir. Normally Sirius would tell them to fuck off but James knows this sort of situation makes him twitchy—reminds him too much of the events his mother and father would drag him to. It is, after all, a very similar crowd. That’s no doubt the reason that, despite his dirty mouth, Sirius has barely touched Remus today.

“Alright, alright enough fucking cheers-ing already,” Mary taps the bottom of her glass against the table before throwing the contents down her throat. The rest of them following suit.

“Blah,” Lily makes a face as she drops her now-empty-glass back onto the table. “That never gets any better.”

“Would have been okay if we had limes!” Marlene sings from across the table before her and Dorcas dissolve into a fit of giggles for reasons no one understands.

“What the hell you guys!” Alice skips towards the table with Frank trailing behind her, his bowtie undone and hanging around his neck, Alice’s shoes in his hands. “You did shots without me!? Without ME? The bride! It’s my special day and you did shots without me!”

“We can get another round for you darling,” Mary offers easily.

“No!” Dorcas cries.

“Absolutely not,” Lily agrees.

“I am not cleaning up vomit tonight,” Remus says, looking dubiously at Sirius.

“Merlin,” Mary rolls her eyes. “You’re all so fucking boring.”

“Honestly, where’s your stamina?” Alice asks as she takes a seat in Mary’s lap, Frank pulling a chair over from the next table. “It’s only—what time is it?” she whispers the second part to Frank who bites his lip in an attempt not to smile.

“Two in the morning.”

Alice throws her arms up—nearly hitting Mary in the face. “It’s only two in the morning! You lot are supposed to be the rowdy ones.”

“I’m almost positive that doesn’t include me,” Remus says.

“Oh please,” Sirius rolls his eyes. “You’re the worst of us.”

“Excuse me?” Remus turns a slightly bewildered look on his partner.

“You heard me,” Sirius doubles down, not the least bit repentant. “You and Evans, damn menaces to society the both of you. And poor James and I, just trying to be upstanding young gentlemen, following the rules, always doing what we’re told.”

“I was such a good boy before she came along,” James opines, clutching at his chest. Lily is already in hysterics, Marlene and Dorcas not far behind.

“I always did think Lily was a bad influence,” Alice chimes in with a grin.

“You’re one to talk,” Lily says between giggles. “You’re nearly as bad as Sirius.”

“What? Little old me?” Alice bats her eyelashes and shimmies her shoulders. “I’m an angel.”

Frank lets out a snort that he quickly tries to cover with a cough.

“Oh my god—do you guys hear that?” Alice demands, falling forward so that she can plant both hands flat on the table.

“Hear what?” Marlene asks.

“It’s my song! They’re playing my song!”

“It’s your wedding babe,” Mary says. “You decided on the music, they’re all your songs.”

This fact does not appear to deter Alice who is already on her feet, yanking Mary up with her. “Come on, come on, come on! You have to dance with me, it’s my special day!!!”

“Merlin that’s getting so old,” Lily says, though she gets up nonetheless.

“Abandoning me are you?” James asks.

Lily arches her brow. “You wanna come dance with me?”

“I don’t wanna outshine you.”

“Gosh, how generous.”

He shrugs. “Just the kind of guy I am.”

“Upstanding gentleman, so I hear.”

James grins up at her as she steps between his thighs. “That’s right.” She runs her hand through his hair before bending down and kissing him—probably deeper than is strictly acceptable considering they’re in public but everyone’s so sloshed that it’s not like it matters.

She pulls back but not far. “I feel like we should leave soon,” she says in a low voice.

Something warm pools low in James’s stomach. “Yeah. Definitely. Very soon.”

Lily laughs, teeth biting into her lower lip and James wonders if she knows how that drives him out of his mind—how every time she does it he imagines replacing her teeth with his own. He wonders if she does it on purpose, it’s the kind of thing that Lily would do.

“EVANS!” Alice shouts from the dance floor, causing them both to look up. “Get your ass over here!”

Lily snorts. “I’ve been summoned.”

“Go on then,” James says, though he’s reluctant to let her go when she steps away. “I think I’m going to enjoy this. You look hot when you dance.”

“Please,” Lily says, walking backwards towards their friends. “I look hot doing anything,” she winks before turning around and James swears his smile is so wide his cheeks are starting to hurt.

“That’s my girlfriend,” he says, a bit in awe, earning him a slap on the back from Sirius and an indulgent smile from Remus.

On the dance floor Alice has jumped onto Mary’s back and begun to swing her veil around like lasso.

“That’s my wife,” Frank says, without a hint of embarrassment.

“Yeah mate,” James laughs, squeezing Frank’s shoulder. “Yeah it is.”

James wakes to a splitting headache and the sound of the floo going off.

“Jesus Christ,” Lily murmurs beside him, grabbing a pillow and throwing it over her face. “Answer it!”

James—who feels like he is currently being beaten with an entire bottle of tequila—has no real desire to get out of bed and even less of a desire to talk to anyone. “Maybe it’ll stop,” he groans, voice raw. Several minutes pass and the noise does not stop.

Lily kicks him.

“Ow!”

“Go see what they want.”

“You go see what they want,” he retorts, petulantly rubbing at his shin.

Lily pulls the pillow away from her face and glares at him. “I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“Because if I see the face of the person who has woken me up this morning I will dismember them bone by bone.” James honestly thinks she means it.

“Ugh, fine,” he rolls—quite literally—out of bed, his body shaky and nauseous as he crawls to the fireplace in the living room and answers the floo call.

“What the fuck do you want,” he says before he even has a chance to recognize who’s calling. It’s then, as the world remains blurry no matter how many times he blinks or rubs his eyes, that he realizes that he’s forgotten his glasses.

“James?” Not that he needs them, once he hears that voice.

“Remus? What is it?” he instantly feels more alert, sitting up straighter and trying to discern Remus’s expression through his blurry vision.

“Sorry, I know it’s early—“

“It’s fine,” James says sincerely, because it’s Remus so he means it. “What’s going on?”

Remus lets out a breath. “It’s Sirius—“ which doesn’t surprise James. The only thing that ever worries Remus enough to ask for help is Sirius. “Moody sent an owl this morning—sent it less than an hour ago—I only saw it because I have this meeting with Dumbledore,” James vaguely remembers Remus mentioning this the night before. Something about Dumbledore saying he had a proposal for Remus but not giving him much more information.

“What’d Moody say?” James asks, glad that his voice doesn’t betray the nerves currently building in his stomach. Moody has never, in James’s experience, been the bearer of good news.

“It’s Walburga,” Remus says wearily.

James feels his eyes go wide. “The fuck she do now?”

Remus laughs dryly. “The Aurors got her on some bullshit charge—illegal potions materials or books or something. They’ve brought her in, want to question her, they know she’s at the centre of the Death Eaters, that she has information.” Sure, James thinks, though they’ll never get her to talk. Unless...

“Are they gonna use Veritaserum?” it’s against the law but given the circumstances James can’t imagine Moody would pass up the opportunity.

Remus only shakes his head. “I have no idea, but Sirius has gone-“

“Gone?” James demands.

“To the Ministry—the Aurors office—no doubt to do something stupid. Normally I would have followed but...”

“Dumbledore,” James finishes for him. And then, quickly; “I’m going, I just—I have to find my trousers but then I’ll be right there.”

“Thank you.”

James almost tells him to fuck off—thanking him for this, like this isn’t a given, isn’t what they do.

“And James?” Remus calls out as James is scrambling back to his feet.

“Yeah?” he asks, blinking down at the blurry face of his friend.

“Be careful okay?”

James tries to give him his most reassuring smile. Sometimes it feels like that’s all they say to one another these days. “Always Moons. I’ll talk to you soon yeah?”

“Yeah.”

His face flickers and then goes out, disappearing into the smoke.

James forces his body to move much faster than it wants to at the present moment. His stomach still threatening to upheave its contents every few seconds.

“What’s going on?” Lily asks sleepily from the bed as James tries and fails to dress silently.

“Moody’s brought Walburga in for questioning.”

Out of the corner of his eye he sees the mountain of blankets shift, a freckled face surrounded by frizzy orange hair emerging at the top. “Shit,” she says, James nods as he hops around on one foot trying to get his socks on. The room spins slightly. Goddamn Mary and her bloody tequila shots.

“How’d they manage that?”

“Got her on a technicality, they won’t be able to keep her long.”

“Shit,” Lily says again. “Sirius—“

“Already there, according to Remus. So I gotta hurry before he does something unhinged like murder the old bat.”

“I mean, that wouldn’t be that unhinged.”

James pauses just long enough to send her a bemused look. “Murdering your mother in front of the entire Auror department wouldn’t be that unhinged?”

“Well it’s not as though she doesn’t deserve it!” Lily says exasperated.

James laughs even though it hurts his head, walking over and kissing her quickly on the mouth. “I love you you little psychopath.”

She catches his arm when he starts to pull away. “Bathroom cabinet, third shelf,” when James just looks at her curiously she rolls her eyes. “Hangover potion.”

“Oh thank god, you’re a bloody angel.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

Another kiss before he heads for the door.

“Will you be here when I get back?” He asks as he grabs a jumper off the back of a chair on his way.

“Dunno,” she gathers the blankets more thoroughly around her until James can only barely see her face. “I have breakfast with mum today.”

“Ah,” James pauses with his hand on the doorframe. “You going to be okay?”

She nods. “I’m fine, Marlene and Mary are coming. You go take care of our boy.”

James grins. “Aye, aye captain,” saluting her before ducking into the hallway.

A very fond “idiot” follows him out.

They’re members of the Order, but they aren’t, technically speaking, Aurors. There just wasn’t time. Wasn’t a point. By the end of their final year at Hogwarts the Ministry was collapsing in on itself, filled with more enemies than friends. No real need to get in deep there. But since the number of Aurors Moody trusts dwindles daily members of the Order are often recruited to assist in Auror duties. None of it is official, of course, which largely doesn’t matter. Except when Moody decides it does.

The bullpen is chaos, Aurors rushing about, shouting at each other from their desks, memos zipping through the air so quickly James fears being decapitated by one. He’s used to it by now, understands that it isn’t quite the disaster area it looks like at first glance. That there is order to the madness. Still, it makes locating Sirius mildly more difficult.

“Morning James,” someone says as he passes, James shoots them a quick smile in acknowledgement.

He has eyes on Moody's office, he figures that's as good a place to start as any. Unfortunately, in order to get into Moody's office he has to get passed—

"Good Morning Mrs. Newberry," he tries to put on his most charming smile but the elderly secretary looks at him with the same contempt that she always does. "I was hoping to see Moody, is there any chance I could just—"

"Do you have an appointment?" she asks with a voice that sounds like it's made of gravel.

"Er—no, bit of a last minute thing. Is he busy or—"

"No one goes in without an appointment," she recites monotonously, eyes going back to the copy of Witch Weekly on her desk. James grits his teeth and does his best not to lose his temper.

"Right, yeah, except somethings happened—do you know if he's in there with Sirius Black by chance?"

"No one goes in without an appointment," she repeats, not looking up. She always wears a garish amount of blue eyeshadow and pink lipstick that makes her difficult to look at without getting a headache.

"I was just asking who he's meeting with," he says through clenched teeth.

"Who Head Auror Moody is meeting with is none of your business," she says, before her eyes flick up over the tops of her glasses. "Especially if you haven't got an appointment."

James is pretty sure he growls. "Listen—"

"Hello Dorris!"

James turns to see a chipper Alice marching towards them, smile on her face.

"What the hell are you doing here?" James asks, unable to keep the shock out of his voice. While he knows that Alice and Frank don't have the luxury of going on any kind of extended honeymoon, he was pretty sure they'd at least taken the day after their wedding off.

Alice pointedly ignores James's question, instead choosing to focus all her energy on the bitter crone in front of them.

"Thank you so much for sending the flowers yesterday they were lovely," Alice says, which earns her little more than a grunt of acknowledgement. "Tell me, how is Pip doing? You said he was ill the last time we talked."

The shift that comes over the secretary is so great that James is genuinely startled. He's never seen the old woman smile before.

"Oh, he's doing so much better. I found a wonderful potion that settled his stomach so he doesn't throw-up his dinner anymore."

“I’m so glad to hear that, I was really worried about him.”

“Oh well, I appreciate that dear,” Mrs. Newberry reaches out and pats the back of Alice’s hand still smiling. James looks between them, understanding not a word of what’s just been said, and wondering if he’s fallen into some kind of alternative universe.

“Well, Moody’s called me in so, I best get going,” Alice smiles, nodding her head towards the office.

“Oh of course, of course, go on,” James notices that the old woman doesn’t ask Alice if SHE has an appointment.

“Thanks,” Alice takes James by the arm and starts dragging him with her. “He told me to take this one in with me,” she explains when Mrs. Newberry gives them a questioning look.

The old woman’s eyes run James up and down disapprovingly. “If you’re sure.”

James makes an indignant noise but Alice shoves him forward before he can say anything. “Unfortunately I am.”

“Unfortunately?” James whispers under his breath once they’re far enough down the short hallway to Moody’s office that he reckons Newberry can’t hear.

“I got you in didn’t I?” Alice hisses back.

“And who the hell is Pip?”

“Her cat.”

“Oh of bloody course she’s a cat lady—ow!” he says when Alice pinches him.

“Don’t be mean.”

They stop in front of a door very helpfully labelled “Alastor Moody” not that you could mistake it for anybody else’s door. James can practically feel the protective spells wafting off of it.

“Not that I’m not eternally grateful that you showed up, but what are you doing here?” James asks as he watches Alice wave her wand about, disabling the various security measures.

“Like I said, Moody sent for me.”

“The day after your wedding?” James demands indignantly.

Alice gives him a smile. “I could have refused, but I saw it was Sirius’s mum and...well... you’re here aren’t you?”

Which James supposes is fair enough.

“Frank?”

She snorts. “Still sleeping.”

“Merlin, the poor son of a bitch is gonna wake-up alone on his honeymoon.”

“I left a note!” Alice says defensively. “Besides, my money’s on him still being asleep when I get back—ah ha!” the door clicks open and Alice sends James a conspiratorial smile. “We’re in,” she whispers, like a little kid who’s just broken into the cookie jar and not her bosses’ office. James can’t help but smile back. Alice really would have made an excellent Marauder.

“Should we knock?” James asks as she reaches for the doorknob. A man with this many safety precautions in place doesn’t strike James as someone who responds positively to being walked in on unannounced. But Alice only shrugs.

“He already knows we’re out here.”

“He—what?”

But that’s all he gets before the door is opened and it becomes immediately apparent that along with every other spell placed on this office, there is also a silencing charm, because the minute they walk inside Sirius’s angry voice rings out loud and clear.

“—ou have no idea what the fuck you’re dealing with.”

“Since it’s my job I reckon I have a bit more understanding than you’d think boy,” Moody snaps back. He’s leaning against the front of his desk while Sirius paces his office, looking like shit. He clearly did not have time for a hangover potion before he left—half-dressed still in his pyjamas, hair a mess, skin pale and clammy.

“Fuck,” James hisses under his breath as the door closes behind him. Neither of the two men seem to notice they have an audience, or if they do they don’t acknowledge it.

“She’s my mother, I know how she works, how she thinks!”

“I’m aware, which is why there is no way I am letting you in that room with her.”

“I can get her to talk!”

“Bullshit, she’ll have you wrapped around her finger in a second—already does.”

“Fuck you.”

“You’re not my type.”

“Fuck. You.”

“I’m not letting anyone who isn’t a trained Auror in that room.”

“This could be our only chance—you’re lucky you got it in the first place.”

“I’m aware, that’s why I’m not taking any risks. And you kid, have risk written all over you.”

“I’ve had to face off against her before, I know what it’s like.”

“Yeah? And how did that go for you?”

“I was a kid!”

“And what are you now?”

Sirius stops his pacing then, looking at Moody, frustrated, and tired, and hurt. And then his face shutters and all those emotions meld into anger. James knows that expression well. Knows it means nothing good.

“Listen you—“

“Hey—wow—hi guys, how’re you doing?” James immediately steps forward placing himself between his best friend and the head of the Auror department. Sirius looks shocked to see him, eyes wide as his gaze bounces from James to Alice. Moody doesn’t even blink.

“Maybe there’s a compromise here,” James goes on slowly. “Maybe Sirius goes in there with an Auror huh?” he looks between the two men. “Would that work?”

Sirius is still clearly trying to process the sudden appearance of James and Alice. He looks like he hasn’t slept—probably because he hasn’t—and James fights the urge to reach out to him. To drag him away from here and keep him safe.

“Okay,” Sirius finally says, after a pause that stretches on so long James almost forgets his own question.

They turn to Moody.

“No.”

“Moody—“ Alice starts, but he holds up his hand and she instantly falls silent. “Do I look like a fool? I put you in there and you’ll lose it.”

“I’m telling you old man,” Sirius snarls. “I can do this.”

“And I’m telling you that you can’t,” James does his best not to flinch, knowing how much that’ll sting Sirius. “You’re a liability.”

“Fine,” Sirius steps towards Moody and James brings his hands up, ready to hold him back if he tries anything. “Then I want it to be James.”

There's a beat of silence.

He hadn’t seen that coming.

“What?” James and Alice ask at the same time.

“What do you mean you want it to be me?” James demands, but Sirius only has eyes for Moody. The old man seems to be the only one not confused by this request. Finally, he turns to Alice.

“Prewett?” he asks, “It’s your call?”

Which again, confuses James, until he realizes that of course this is why Moody sent for Alice. Not because he was holding her friend’s mother in a cell at the Ministry, but because she’s the Auror he wants to question her. Moody has a soft spot for Alice. Everybody does really.

“It’s Longbottom now,” Alice corrects, causing Moody to raise his brow.

“Married the fool then?”

“Absolutely.”

Moody makes some sort of snort in response that James can’t interrupt as being bad or good but Alice doesn’t seem offended so he decides there’s no point in being offended for her.

“I’m fine with James being in the interrogation with me. As long as he does everything I say that is,” she shoots James a wink.

James feels like he’s moving slightly slower than everyone else. “That what you want?” he asks Sirius.

“You know her,” Sirius says. “If it can’t be me I want it to be you,” and then, in a quiet, desperate voice. “She might finally have to pay.”

James knows how much this means to Sirius, that this is a moment he never expected to come—his mother, the great Walburga Black, in Auror custody. The idea that she might be punished, sent to Azkaban, used against the Dark Lord—it’s important to him.

James reaches out, squeezing Sirius’s shoulder. “She will. I promise you she will.” They hold eye contact for a moment longer before James looks to Alice and Moody. “Okay,” he says, “how do we do this?”

“Are we using Veritaserum?” Alice asks, stepping forward.

Sirius lets out a bitter laugh that James doesn’t understand. Moody shoots him an unimpressed glare but answers Alice; “Yes, though there are some...complications.”

“Complications?” Alice repeats. “Like, legally you mean?”

“No, the suspect has a tolerance.”

There’s a beat of silence. “What?” James and Alice ask for the second time.

“The bitch is immune,” Sirius answers, only marginally more helpfully.

“Immune to Veritaserum?” James asks. “How is that possible? IS that even possible?”

“She’s a fucking demon that’s how,” Sirius mumbles, which James suspects is not the actual answer.

“She isn’t fully immune,” Moody corrects. “But it doesn’t effect her as strongly as it does most people. We tried when she was first brought in and when we noticed something was off we had her examined by a Healer. He couldn’t say for sure but he thinks she’s been taking small doses of it over an extended period of time to build up a tolerance.”

“Holy shit,” James says, because that’s somehow the craziest and most brilliant thing he’s ever heard.

“Yes, thanks for that astute observation Potter,” Moody mutters. “So you see, this interview will be difficult, she’s still been dosed but you’re going to have to pull the answers from her more than you normally would.”

Alice nods, basically bouncing on the balls of her feet with—if not excitement—anticipation. “Understood. Can we start now?”

“You better, the Black entourage isn’t going to let us keep their Queen Bee in holding for long.”

Alice nods again, looking back over at James who had fully expected to spend most of today sleeping in his cozy bed with his adorable girlfriend and not facing off against his best mates terrifying mother.

“You ready?”

No. “Yes.”

Alice grins. “Then lets do this.”

They head down to a floor James has never been to before. It’s in one of the Ministry’s many basements. There are no windows, and while magic can very easily create light where there is none, no one seems to have thought that was necessary down here. The walls are unnervingly grey and smooth, glowing orbs lighting the way along the ceiling, organized in a single file line. The silence down here feels unnatural, James suspects it’s the result of many very powerful silencing charms. No noise from the rooms escapes into the hallways and vice versa.

“What exactly is our game plan here?” James asks quietly. Moody and Sirius stayed behind, though Moody very nearly had to tie Sirius to a chair to stop him from following.

“The plan is to find out as much information as we can—who’s working for the Dark Lord, where they are, what they do, what he’s planning, if any of the hostages he’s taken are still alive.”

James nods, he had more or less figured that part out. “And what do we need to find out to put her away for good?”

Alice gives him a sidelong glance. “That’s not the main goal here James.”

He’s so very glad that Sirius isn’t here to hear that. “But it’s still a goal right?” He is aware that there are bigger things at stake than his best friend’s abusive mother paying for all the pain she’s caused him. But that doesn’t mean he’s going to let it go.

“Hopefully, if we get her talking, she’ll incriminate herself. But it is possible we’ll have to offer her immunity to get her talking in the first place.”

James’s feet stutter to a stop, Alice continuing on for a few seconds before realizing and turning back.

“Are you kidding?”

She looks resigned. “We only have so many options here James.”

“We are not offering that woman fucking immunity.”

Alice’s gaze tells him that they will be doing whatever the hell she says. “If it gets us information that will save lives and win us this war you bet your scrawny ass we are,” at the look of abject horror on James’s face she sighs. “Look, I don’t like it either, but we don’t have any good options at this point. And Walburga Black is not our biggest threat.”

“That’s what you think,” James mutters under his breath but starts walking again anyway.

A few seconds pass before he feels Alice bumping her shoulder into his. He looks over at her. “I’ll do my best for Sirius okay?” she says sincerely. “I promise.”

He nods, knowing that she means it. “Okay.”

They reach a door near the end of the hall with two burgundy robed Aurors guarding it.

“Gentlemen,” Alice smiles at the pair of them. “I believe you’ve been expecting us?”

The men do not smile back. “Password?”

“Flitterby.”

The men nod. “The prisoner is restrained by chains, remain on your side of the table, she has no weapons and no magical instruments, do not touch her and do not give her anything. Understood?”

“Understood,” Alice says. There’s a pause that stretches on for a long time before Alice elbows James in the ribs. “Do you understand?” she asks through clenched teeth.

“Oh,” James says, surprised. “Oh—er—yeah, understood.” He imagines it would be better if he sounded a bit more confident. The guard’s eyes linger on him longer than they had

on Alice before he eventually speaks again.

“Knock twice when you want to be let out.”

“Got it,” Alice flashes them another smile as they wave their wands and the door unlocks.

“Thank you very much.”

James keeps close to her, trying not to make eye contact with the intimidating Aurors as he walks into a small square room with a single table in the centre. There are two chairs on one side of the table and one on the other which is currently occupied by a slender dark haired woman with a birdlike face—sharp bones and beady eyes. James feels himself freeze when those eyes find him, cutting right through his skin to the soft vulnerable parts beneath.

“Hello Mrs. Black,” Alice says, cheery as anything as she takes her seat across from Walburga. James does the same but without any warm greetings, eyes dissecting the woman in front of him.

It’s not that he’s never seen her before, of course he has. The Wizarding community is not very large and even if they despise one another the sacred 28 inevitably end up in the same room at some point. At gatherings he was dragged to as a kid he would see the looming figures of Walburga and Orion Black, though only ever from a distance.

Dark eyes stare expressionlessly back at them, first focused on Alice and then James. He feels a flash of anger course through him so hot he’s surprised he doesn’t burst into flames. He has to curl his hands around the edges of his chair to stop himself from reaching for his wand. He never drops her gaze, never flinches, holding that empty stare and forcing as much disgust as he can manage into his own.

Eventually Alice clears her throat, bringing the old crones attention back to her. “We’re going to be asking you a few questions today, okay? We’ll start with the easy ones,” Alice’s ability to remain imperviously cheerful despite the emotional blackhole in front of them is truly astounding. James actually thinks it’s pissing Walburga off a little bit.

“Your permanent address is currently Twelve Grimauld Place, London, England, correct?” She looks across at Walburga still smiling.

There's a moment or two of dead silence before Walburga responds. “No.”

That surprises James, if Alice feels similarly she doesn’t show it.

“Oh?” is all she says. “And where are you residing now?”

Another long pause, and James wonders if this is the Veritaserum—if each one of these pauses is her fighting it, forced to say something but not everything. Feeling the tug but not strong enough to take anything from her that she isn’t willing to give.

“I’ve relocated to our holiday home in Scotland. It’s easier for my husband. He’s very sick.” All of this is said in a nearly mechanical voice, something vaguely sharp hiding behind each vowel.

“Ah,” Alice says, waving her wand and James notices the quill and pad of paper bedside her for the first time. The quill begins writing of its own accord. “Excellent. Does that mean that Twelve Grimmauld Place is currently empty?”

The woman’s eyes narrow. “No,” she says coldly. They wait for further information but none comes.

“Who is occupying it then, if not yourself and your husband?”

There’s another long pause, longer than the others, she is clearly fighting the potion more, meaning there is more to hide in this answer.

“My son,” she says finally. “Regulus.”

Something lurches in James’s chest and he’s almost certain he physically reacts, feeling Alice’s eyes flick over to him briefly and then away again.

Get it together Potter, he snaps at himself, trying to ignore the lingering ache. Trying not to picture Regulus alone in that house.

“And it’s just him? By himself?” Alice asks, as if reading James’s mind, though he knows she’s asking for completely different reasons.

Another stretch of silence. “He has visitors,” the words have the same stilted air as everything else she’s said.

“Like who?” Alice asks.

Walburga’s jaw is tense but she doesn’t look nervous, doesn’t look like someone afraid they’re going to let something slip. “How would I know? I’m not there.” James almost laughs. No one is buying that.

“I’m sure he tells you or they tell you, it is your house after all?”

“It’s the Black family home, it exists for all who need it. And deserve it.” She looks at James when she says that last bit, bringing his anger back to the surface. They both know who she’s talking about.

“So you’re saying it acts as a base?” Alice pushes on. “A headquarters?”

Walburga almost looks bored now. “I quite literally said none of that.”

“But your youngest son’s house is open to all those you deem worthy?”

“He’s not my youngest son,” Walburga says, answer coming more quickly than anything else she’s said. “He’s my only son.”

Before James can open his mouth he feels Alice’s hand clamp down on his arm, a warning, to hold his tongue. So he’s forced to swallow the bile currently crawling up the back of his throat.

“Does he have final say on who’s allowed in or do you?” and James realizes suddenly that she’s trying to figure out if Regulus has taken over as head of the family, if Walburga’s move to the Scottish countryside symbolizes a shift in the hierarchy. He wants to tell her that she’s wasting her time. That Regulus would never—that he only wants to survive, not move through the ranks.

But he doesn’t.

Because this is an interrogation.

And because he hasn’t seen Regulus in two years. Maybe he’s changed. That thought lances through James’s chest so brutally that he brings up his free hand to rub his sternum as though tending to a physical wound.

The silences are back, this one feeling particularly long. “The house decides who it trusts.”

James scoffs, rolling his eyes and earning his arm another squeeze from Alice. It sounds like something the portraits of his great aunts would say. Something about old stones and blood and family homes. Love magic. That sort of thing. Superstitious nonsense. Old Wizarding homes are magic sure, but they aren’t sentient. More like...houseplants. Water them and give them sunlight and they’ll prosper, neglect them and they’ll shutter and wither. But they can’t think.

Walburga turns her cold eyes on him. “You don’t believe in the old magic? I’d have thought even your pathetic excuse for a mother would have taught you better.”

Alice’s fingernails are literally piercing through his shirt she’s holding on so tightly.

“I don’t believe anything that comes out of your mouth,” he snarls, once he can trust himself not to take things too far.

Her lips twitch. “But I’ve taken your silly little potion,” Jesus Christ, James thinks with mild horror, is she smiling? “How could I do anything but tell the truth?”

“Are you in frequent contact with your nieces?” Alice jumps in before the conversation can really derail itself. “Narcissa? Bellatrix? Their husbands?”

Walburga stares blandly at her. “I keep in touch with all my family.”

Another scoff comes out of James’s mouth before he can stop himself. All her family except her fucking son. Not that he isn’t better off for it.

“There are fears that perhaps your nieces’ husbands may be passing Ministry information to the Dark Lord,” the fact that Alice is able to get that sentence out with a straight face, as though everyone in the room doesn’t know it’s true, as though it isn’t the worst kept secret in the Ministry, is impressive. The problem is, they can’t fucking prove it. And perhaps, beyond that, what would they do if they could? Who would convict them? Who isn’t in Lucius’s pocket? Or Rodolphus’s?

“They are both upstanding members of the Wizarding community,” Walburga answers haughtily. “Lucius is practically a second father to my son.”

“Jesus fucking Christ.”

This is a mistake. He shouldn't be in here. He was ready for the jabs about Sirius, for the anger he would feel because of him, but he hadn't been prepared for all the ways that Regulus would be present in this room with them. All the reminders of the boy he couldn't save.

Both Alice and Walburga are looking at him now with matching expressions of confusion. He can't explain himself. Even if he could he wouldn't, not to this woman who calls herself Regulus's mother.

“So Lucius Malfoy is a frequent guest at Grimmauld Place?” Alice pushes on, still shooting James curious looks out of the corner of her eye.

“Lucius is always welcome.” Which isn't an answer, but nothing she's said is. They're getting nowhere. “Family is always welcome.”

“Makes sense,” Alice concedes with another smile. “So I'd assume that would include Narcissa as well?”

“Of course.”

“Bellatrix?”

“Yes.”

“Rolduphus? Rabastan?”

“Yes.”

Walburga's mouth snaps shut, realization dawning on her at the same moment that Alice's smile becomes a little more sincere.

“Funny,” Alice says, leaning forward across the table. “Seeing as Rabastan's supposed to be in Azkaban.”

Walburga's jaw locks, eyes somehow managing to grow even colder.

“Tell me, Mrs. Black, what exactly is a wanted man doing at your house?”

Still nothing.

“A man very publicly connected to the terrorist group known as the Death Eaters.”

Silence.

“Maybe you need a break huh?” Alice pushes away from the table, getting to her feet.
“C’mon James, lets give our guest a moment to mull that over.”

But James doesn’t move, eyes dead set on the woman in front of him. He isn’t done yet.

“James?”

Ideally Alice wouldn’t be here, but he can’t see any scenario in which she walks out that door and leaves him alone with Walburga so it’ll just have to do. In a weird way this is the closest he’s been to Regulus in a long time. He hadn’t thought it would matter.

He’d been wrong.

“Is he okay?” the question comes out needier than he’d like, probably because he’s been obsessing over it for weeks and months and years. Ever since he came back to Hogwarts and Regulus didn’t. Back then he’d thought about going after him—going back to Grimmauld Place. But that hadn’t exactly worked out for him the first time, and he didn’t want to make things worse for Regulus. Besides, what would he have done anyway? Regulus made his choice.

Walburga arches her brow. “Is who okay?”

“Your only son,” James sneers, lips curling over his teeth. James can feel Alice’s eyes on him but he ignores her.

Walburga’s shrewd gaze narrows. “Why?”

“Because I want to know.”

“Why?”

“Is Lucius living in that house with him?” James demands, the very thought making him feel sick.

For the first time Walburga looks genuinely thrown. “I told you, Lucius is like a father—“

“Bullshit,” James cuts her off. “That’s bullshit and you and I both know it. So tell me, did you leave him alone with that man?” he makes sure to pack as much disgust into those last words as he can.

The confusion has fled Walburga’s face and the sharpness has returned. “My son is none of your concern James Potter.”

“You don’t deserve to be his mother,” James hisses back. “Just like you didn’t deserve to be Sirius’s.”

“James,” Alice says in a warning tone behind him.

Anger flares in Walburga’s dark gaze, all pretence of neutrality gone. “You corrupted him.”

James laughs coldly. “Please, Sirius didn’t leave because of me. He left because of YOU. Because of who you are.”

But the old woman only bares her teeth. “I used to be able to get through to him, to make him listen, it was hard but I could still do it, then he went to that school. Then he met you. He was so beautiful when he was born—my son, my heir—he had so much promise.”

James is genuinely shocked by the emotion in her voice—in her words—and if the look on her face is anything to go by Walburga is surprised too. He wonders, if in the heat of the moment, the Veritaserum finally got the better of her.

“Sirius was never your’s,” James says finally. “I’m not the one who got him sorted into Gryffindor, that was all him. Blame me if you want, but you’re the one who pushed him a way. With your cruelty and your hatred. There’s no world in which Sirius was ever going to be able to stomach it.”

“You made him weak,” she practically spits.

“No,” James says firmly. “Not possible. Sirius Black is the strongest person I know.”

Her hand comes out of nowhere, the chains connecting them to the table rattling as she grabs hold of James’s wrists, nails digging in.

“Hey!” Alice yells, stepping forward, but James waves her off with the shake of his head. He might be terrified but he also wants to hear what else she has to say.

“You thought you could take them from me but you failed. Sirius may never have been mine but Regulus is, he always has been.” She sneers, no doubt feeling him flinch at her words despite his best efforts not to. Before James can think of a reply she presses on.

“I saw you in his head,” she says, nails piercing James’s skin. “He tried to hide you from me but I saw. He’d been looking at some ridiculous photo his brother left behind, he pretended his interest was Sirius but in his head all he saw was you.”

James jerks back, trying and failing to pull his hand from her grip. This is too much. He wasn’t expecting this. It hurts so much more than he thought it would after all this time.

“I decided then that we couldn’t wait any longer, that the next time he returned he would take the Mark. Take his rightful place.” She’s smiling again. It makes James’s blood run cold. “He’s the youngest, you know. The youngest wizard to bare the Dark Lord’s Mark. And he owes that honour to you.”

James doesn’t know what his face does then but it’s enough to make Alice step in, she rips Walburga’s hand off of him, grabbing James by the arm and hauling him out of his seat. He feels numb, he knows he’s shaking, her words running laps around his head.

“I’ll be back,” she snaps at a laughing Walburga as she knocks twice on the door causing it to swing open.

James thinks he hears her say something to the men outside but he can't be sure, the buzzing in his ears too loud. They only pause for a minute before Alice starts dragging him away again.

"Here," she says, not unkindly, throwing open the door to an empty room once they're out of the guards' sight. "Sit."

It looks like the room they were just in and James cringes as he takes his seat. A moment later Alice has conjured a glass of water and is handing it to him.

"Alice—"

"Drink. Breathe. Then talk."

He nods, taking the cold glass and doing as she said. Alice pulls up a chair across from him, waiting until he places the water shakily down on the table. She looks at him expectantly, brow raised, and when James doesn't speak she reaches out and takes his hands gently in her's.

"James?" it's a nudge, and he knows he won't get out of this without saying something.

"Don't tell Sirius," he manages finally, eyes meeting her's, the words tasting like ash in his mouth. Like betrayal.

She nods slowly. "That you brought up Regulus?"

"Yes. Please, it'll—it'll just stir up old shit." He doesn't want to see the look on Sirius's face, doesn't want to hear the tone in Remus's voice when he finds out and decides they need to talk about it. He doesn't want to unpack and process. He doesn't want to answer the questions that will inevitably get asked.

Do you still want him?

Need him?

Love him?

"Okay," Alice says eventually, pulling him out of his spiralling thoughts. She squeezes his hands. "Are you good to go back up to Moody's office?"

James takes a deep breath, trying to settle himself. Sirius reads him too well, he can't go back with everything written on his face. Besides, it wouldn't be fair. This isn't about him. It's Sirius's family—Sirius's mum.

"I just need another minute—sorry."

"Hey, it's okay. We can stay as long as you need, alright?"

James laughs wetly. "You're such a mum."

Alice grins. “God willing, if Moody ever lets me get back to baby making.”

James makes a face. “Ew, gross, way too much information.”

“You asked!”

“Did not!”

“Did too!”

He laughs again, more genuinely this time, pulling his hands from her grip to wipe at his face. “Thank you,” he says, voice quiet.

Alice’s eyes go soft. “I’m here you know. Whatever it is—we have your back James.”

“I know,” he says, voice a little rough. “I have your’s too, always.” He just hopes he’ll be able to prove it.

Alice leans forward and kisses his cheek.

“Just a few more minutes I swear,” James says sheepishly, worried she felt the clamminess of his skin—the shaking underneath.

“As long as you need,” is all she says.

Problem is, it’s been two years. Two years and all it took was hearing Regulus’s name spoken out loud to start James bleeding again. At this point, he isn’t sure there’s long enough.

PART II LILY

It's a beautiful day, especially after Lily gets rid of her monster hangover. She takes her time leaving the flat, hoping that James will come back so she can make sure him and Sirius are okay, but she knows it’s a bit of a lost cause. Nothing at the Ministry ever goes quickly and there’s no way Walburga is going to make this easy on anyone.

“Stupid cow,” she mutters as she heads out, hoping that Sirius is allowed to punch her at least once. I mean yes, okay, she is generally against people punching their mothers, but in this instance she feels she can make an exception.

“Oooh,” Marlene is leaning against a tree as Lily approaches. “What’d you bring, what’d you bring, what’d you bring?”

Lily smiles, holding up the brown paper bag in her hand. “Croissants. You?”

“Everything bagels with cream cheese,” she gestures to the box in her own hands.

Lily hears her stomach rumble. “God bless you, I’m starving.”

Marlene smirks. “We have to wait for Mary, she’s bringing the coffee.”

“Can’t believe we entrusted her with the most important thing.”

“Um, excuse me,” Marlene shakes her box. “Bagels are very important!”

Lily smiles. “Sorry, of course, you’re right. It isn’t breakfast without multiple forms of carbs.”

“Ain’t that the truth,” Marlene knocks their shoulders together. “James still asleep?”

“No, he got called into the Ministry.”

The good humour instantly drains from Marlene’s face so Lily rushes to explain. “It’s nothing—well, it is serious but not—the Aurors are holding Walburga.”

Marlene’s eyebrows nearly disappear into her fringe. “Walburga? Walburga Black? Walburga-Sirius’s-mum-Walburga?”

“The very same,” Lily says dryly, wishing desperately that she had some coffee, she checks down the road but sees no sign of Mary.

“Shit—does—“

“Sirius knows,” she answers before Marlene can even get the question out. “James said he was already at the Ministry when he left.”

“Double shit.”

They’re quiet for a moment, the sounds of the suburbs filtering in around them. Cars driving by, children shouting, a lawnmower going. And—

“Well don’t you two just look so sad and pathetic standing there without me?”

Marlene rolls her eyes as they both turn to see Mary walking towards them still in last night’s clothes, coffee tray in hand.

“Is this really an appropriate place to be doing your walk of shame?”

“You’re making the mistake of thinking that I am in anyway ashamed,” Mary says, pulling the coffee out of Marlene’s reach when she tries to grab one of the cups. “Slut shamers don’t get caffeine.”

“Oh come on! That is not what I was doing and you know it!” Marlene stares longingly at the cups of coffee.

“Hello Lily dear,” Mary gives her a quick kiss on the cheek. “Sorry I’m late, the boy was still asleep when I left so I couldn’t ask him where the nearest Apparation point was and the tube was bloody dreadful.”

Lily smirks. “You’re alright, I only just got here too.”

“I was on time!” Marlene says proudly, making another grab for the coffee.

“I’m sure you were,” Mary easily avoids her, “Did you remember the blankets this time?”

“Oi! You’re the one who forgot them last time!”

“Alright children,” Lily says playfully. “Lets go see mum, yeah?”

“Excellent idea Lily,” Mary says, Marlene sticking her tongue out at her.

“Suck up,” she murmurs under her breath as the girls walk through the austere gates in front of them and start up the winding gravel path inside.

Mary shifts her tray of coffee so that she can link her free arm with Lily’s.

“You had a fun night I take it?” Lily asks quietly, everything here feels like it needs to be soft, though she isn’t exactly sure who it is she thinks is listening.

Mary grins. “Very fun, Alice has some talented cousins.”

“Cousins? As in multiple?” Marlene asks.

Mary “tsks” “Here we go again with the slut shaming.”

“I am not slut shaming!” Marlene declares, a bit too loudly, her voice bouncing off of the trees and stones surrounding them.

“Wake the dead why don’t you,” Mary mutters, earning her a snort from Lily.

“I’m NOT slut shaming,” Marlene repeats at a lower volume. “I just want all the details for when I tell Dorcas later. Obviously.”

Mary shoots her a smile. “Oh well, in that case, yes. Cousins. Multiple.”

They pull off the path and onto the grass, Lily letting Mary and Marlene’s chatter fade into the background as her mum comes into view. Her arm slips free of Mary’s.

“Morning mum,” she says softly, hand reaching out to touch the cold granite stone. She stays like that for a moment before looking around, to make sure no one else is there, and then pulling out her wand. She cleans up the debris that’s gathered around since her last visit, vanishing old dead flowers and replacing them with new ones. “There we are,” she murmurs, giving the stone one last pat before turning around to see that Marlene and Mary have already laid out the blankets and food.

Lily joins them, grabbing a coffee and taking a big sip. “Ah,” she says, the satisfying feeling of caffeine flooding through her. “So, what do we have to catch her up on?”

“I mean, there’s the fact that Mary hooked up with several of Alice’s cousins last night—ow!” Marlene rubs her arm after Mary punches her.

“Does that really sound like mum appropriate gossip Mar?” she demands, but Lily only laughs.

“Nah, she would have liked it. According to my aunt she was kind of a wild child when she was younger.”

“Oh yeah?” Mary asks, looking appreciatively at the stone where Lily’s mother and father’s names are carved side by side.

“Details, details, details!” Marlene chants, now clutching her own coffee cup.

“Well okay, if you’re going to twist my arm,” Mary smirks. “Do you remember the brothers in the dark blue suits?”

Lily squints at her. “That’s is so vague.”

Mary rolls her eyes. “Is not, they were the only ones there in navy blue.” Most of last night is a blur for Lily, she certain can’t remember anyone’s suit colour.

“Oh my god,” Marlene snaps her fingers. “Were they ginger?”

“Mmhm,” Mary hums, taking a bite out of her croissant.

“Gideon and Fabian?” Lily chimes in, surprised.

Mary points her croissant at her as she swallows. “Ding, ding, ding.”

“I cannot believe you hooked up with Gideon AND Fabian,” Marlene says, shaking her head. “Those family dinners are going to be so awkward now.”

“Listen, I can’t help that they’re both gorgeous, I couldn’t choose,” Mary turns towards the headstone. “I promise you Mrs. Evans they were absolute stunners, I normally have a rule about immediate family members but if you could’ve seen them you’d understand.”

Lily smiles, tearing into a bagel. She isn’t sure how this started exactly, or, she is, but it still feels a bit mad to her.

It was hard, after her mother died. Lily hadn’t really known how to process it, she had felt so much grief it had been overwhelming. James had been wonderful of course, always there when she needed him, always willing to talk. But none of it seemed to...help. She wasn’t ready yet, to let go of her mum. So she started coming to visit her here. She’d stay for a few hours just sitting here, thinking, talking, maybe obsessing a little. About what she should have done. About all she failed to do.

Then one morning Mary showed up. Lily isn’t sure how she knew where to find her, if it was James or just Mary’s insane intuition, but she’d brought coffee and she sat with Lily. Then the next time Marlene was there too, doughnuts in hand. And so it started—breakfast with mum.

They come every two weeks when they can manage it. Every month when they can't. And slowly it's...helped. Helped her feel like her mother hasn't just disappeared from her life. Helped her feel like she still has a family.

Staring at her friends, picnicking in a graveyard, she knows it's odd. Maybe it isn't the right way to do this—to grieve—Lily doesn't know. But it gets her through. These days that's all any of them can really ask for.

PART III REGULUS

He stumbles a bit as he Apparates onto the stoop of his parents' house. The inside is empty, though the windows are all thrown open, letting in the sweet summer air and causing the long white curtains to flutter in the breeze like wings. It's been almost a year since his parents first moved to Scotland permanently and yet somehow the place still feels deserted.

The action is in London, at Grimmauld, with its never ending stream of people always coming in and out. Regulus never would have thought that his mother would willingly step away from all that—willingly remove herself from the centre of power and politics. But then, he'd forgotten that there's always been one thing she's loved more than the family name or the Pureblood cause.

Her husband.

Orion is too weak and too sick for the mess that is Grimmauld Place. So he moved out here. And three weeks later, unable to be so far away from him, Walburga followed. Sometimes Regulus will catch them together, more now than ever before, maybe because his father is nearer to dying, and his mother's face will be almost soft, her hand in his, her voice a whisper, and it will render Regulus speechless. Frozen in awe. He doesn't know who that woman is who tends so diligently to his dying father. He just knows he's never met her. Knows she's never deemed him worthy of her care.

Of course, today, his father is alone.

"Papa?" he calls out softly as he enters his father's bedroom. Brighter and fresher than the one he'd had in London, with a view of his garden, which Regulus knows he likes.

Orion is thin—the thinnest he's ever been—his pallor so far past pale he now looks vaguely blue, veins lighting up his arms and face. He has no hair left and his hands shake so badly that he can't hold anything—can't write letters or bring food to his mouth.

His father's eyes blink open, face lighting up when he turns to find Regulus at his side. "Mon rayon de soleil," his voice rough like sandpaper. He reaches out a shaking hand to cup Regulus's face. "I didn't know you were coming today."

Regulus smiles back. "I know, sorry, bit unexpected."

His father kisses his teeth. “Ne dit pas désolé, every day I get to see you is a good day, you know this.”

He does. It eats him up sometimes, when he isn’t able to get away from the city for a few days. Terrified every second that he’s going to get the message that his father has died and he hasn’t been able to say goodbye. To hold his hand. To tell him that he loves him.

“Have you seen your maman? She was meant to be back by now,” his father lets his hand drop, too weak to hold it up for long. It’s years of practice that allows Regulus to keep his expression blank.

“That’s why I’m here, she got held up so she’s going to be back later. I can’t stay but I wanted to check in, let you know, make sure you’re okay,” there’s no way in hell that Regulus is going to tell his dying father that his wife is currently being held for questioning at the Ministry. He severely doubts anything serious is happening to her, and Lucius and Rodolphus are currently working on getting her released as soon as possible, but still…it’s the type of thing likely to worry his father unnecessarily.

Orion’s eyes grow wide with concern. “She is alright, your maman?”

“Yes, of course,” Regulus smiles, taking his father’s hand and squeezing. “You know her, she can’t leave anything half done, has to see everything through to the end, make sure it’s all done right.”

His father smiles back. “That is certainly true.”

Regulus nods, desperate to change the subject. “So,” he says, giving his father’s hand another squeeze. “Are you okay?”

His father scoffs at the question. “Of course. I am dying, but I am okay.” From anyone else that answer would have been sarcastic, but not his father, who faces death with so much brevity that Regulus sometimes wonders if he wants it.

Sometimes wonders the same thing about himself.

It is a strange dichotomy he has found. To fear dying so profoundly and yet at the same time wish he was dead on a near daily basis. Regulus shakes his head, clearing it of its morbid thoughts.

“Right, well, besides dying—are you hungry? Thirsty? Cold? Can I get you a book or play some music? A blanket?”

His father lets out a breath that might have, years earlier, been a laugh. “Non, mon chou, j’ai seulement besoin de toi. Talk to me for a while?”

And Regulus makes sure not to show the tiny ways his father’s request makes his heart ache. “Of course,” he summons a chair from across the room and takes a seat. “Where should I start? Ah, I know, Evan is seeing someone, and that is going about as well as you would expect.”

His father manages a proper laugh now. “Oh young love, it never ceases to entertain. Tell me more.”

And so he does.

Regulus stays far longer than he means to. Than he should have. Eating dinner with his father and then waiting until he falls asleep before leaving. Hopefully Walburga will be back in Scotland before he wakes up and he'll be none the wiser to the minor crisis that occurred today.

A man nearly runs into Regulus on his way through the front door of Grimmauld Place—he doesn't recognize him but that isn't uncommon. Regulus has come to learn that his family is rather terrifying. Which means people tend to steer clear of him if they can manage it. Makes it hard to get to know anyone. Not that Regulus minds.

“Excuse me,” the man mutters—or maybe not a man—now that he speaks he sounds young, closer to Regulus's age, though it's hard to know for sure since he has a scarf wrapped around his face and the hood of his cloak pulled up. A small tuft of blond hair sticks out the side. He keeps his head down and gives Regulus as wide a berth as the front hall will allow before scurrying outside promptly disappearing.

He doesn't even stop long enough to close the door behind him. Regulus rolls his eyes.

“Rude,” he mutters under his breath as he closes and locks it for good measure.

The sitting room is full of chatter, someone's put the wireless on, and Regulus can smell the alcohol from the hall. He presses on. One or two figures loiter at the bottom of the stairs, all of them looking down when Regulus approaches. He ignores them, taking the stairs two at a time until he reaches his room. The top floor is blissfully quiet. For the first time in his life he is glad that his parents stashed him so far away.

He closes the door behind him, shucking his jacket onto the bed and pulling out his wand.

“Expecto Patronum,” he mutters, barely even thinking about it. It's just habit by now. There's a burst of light and then out of his wand gallops a stag.

“Hello boy,” he says as the phantom beast rubs his head affectionately against Reg's shoulder—both there and not there at the same time. The animal stamps his hooves happily before he starts puttering around the room, never able to stay still. Regulus gives him a fond smile.

He's not sure how it started exactly, just that one day he tried, just to see if he could still do it. He dragged up the memories he kept so carefully tucked away, placed them at the forefront of his mind for the first time in ages and watched the beautiful thing they created fill up his room. The feeling that the spell causes in his chest—the warmth, and comfort and... completeness—he's become a little addicted to it. Addicted to the manifestation of his happiest memories.

With his Patronus now happily milling about his room Regulus starts pulling newspapers from his bag. He's collected three today—one is even Muggle. He flips through the pages, snipping out the relevant articles with his wand.

It wasn't long into his career as a member of the Dark Lord's inner circle that Regulus realized how little any of them were told about what was going on. Their Master gives them all bits and pieces but no one, not even his mother, seems to have any idea of what the full picture is. So Regulus started looking for clues. It's a distraction more than anything else, a puzzle to focus on as apposed to what's really going on around him. What he's really doing. He looks at it like coursework—a school project. He's always been good at those.

The newspapers help him piece together what the rest of the Wizarding world knows, what the Muggles know, and also, occasionally, the locations of certain Death Eaters that he hadn't been made aware of. Between what the papers know from the outside and Regulus knows from the inside, he's been able to figure out a few of the jobs the Dark Lord has assigned his followers more discretely.

He isn't sure what he'll do with this information. Likely nothing. But he keeps looking for it anyway. He sticks the new articles up on his wall with the old ones, standing back to admire his handiwork, eyes scanning the headlines and names he's highlighted overtime. Connections he's made. He's about to grab his journal and make some notes when he hears a knock on the door of his bedroom.

Instantly his stag is standing in front of him, a fierce look in his eyes as he tilts his head down, showing his antlers to the door. Regulus can't help but smirk a little. It's nice, having someone to protect him. He leans back against his bedpost, arms crossing over his chest.

“Yes?”

The door opens and immediately there's shrieking. “Oh for fuck's sake Regulus,” Narcissa snaps, hand going to her chest. “Do you have to have that thing around all the time?”

His stag paws at the ground, looking ready to charge.

Regulus doesn't bother answering Narcissa's question: “Down boy,” he says instead. Instantly the stag lifts his head, looking at Regulus questioningly. “She's harmless, it's okay.”

Narcissa scoffs as she inches further into the room, making a wide circle around the Patronus. “It can't hear you, you know? It's just an...incantation, not an actual animal.”

Regulus ignores her, reaching out to scratch behind the stag's ears—more solid than a ghost, less solid than a person. The stag closes his eyes and tilts his head up appreciatively and Regulus has to fight back a smile. When he finally turns to Narcissa she's standing on the other side of the room looking on with great disapproval.

“I don't think this is healthy. You spend more time with that thing than you do with actual people.”

Regulus rolls his eyes. “He’s not a ‘thing’ he’s a ‘him’ and don’t start with me. As though anyone in this fucking family is healthy.”

Narcissa looks like she wants to argue but decides against it.

“So?” he asks after a silence that stretches on too long, his Patronus returning to exploring the corners of his room. Narcissa watches him warily. “I’m assuming there’s something you want?”

She shifts, and Regulus has a feeling it’s more than the stag that’s making her uncomfortable. After several more seconds of fighting with her words Narcissa eventually speaks. “I need...I need a favour.”

“I’m shocked.”

She shoots him a sharp look. “Don’t be a brat Regulus.”

“Stop wasting my time Narcissa.”

“Oh like you’re so busy,” she sneers.

“I’m sorry, do you want my help or not?”

That shuts her up. She sighs, rubbing a hand over her face, making sure not to disturb her perfectly coiffed hair.

“I’m sorry,” she says eventually. “I don’t mean to snap I—I haven’t been sleeping.”

Regulus arches his brow. “Still?” he just gave her a months worth of Dreamless Sleep a few days ago.

Narcissa looks away. “Yes, still. Anyway, that’s not...the favour.”

He waits for her to continue but she once again seems to be struggling. “I—we—” she grimaces in frustration. “I’m still not pregnant.”

Regulus continues to stare at her. “Okay?”

She finally looks back at him, her expression a mixture of determination and embarrassment. “I was wondering—I was hoping—you would make me a fertility potion.”

The request shouldn’t surprise him and yet for some reason it does. There are about a dozen different questions floating through his mind, perhaps the loudest being “how the fuck could you ask me that?” but luckily what ends up making it out of his mouth is far more reasonable.

“I thought you were already seeing a Healer?”

He watches her jaw clench. “I am.”

“I would assume they’ve prescribed you fertility potions then?”

“Yes.”

“So why...”

“I was hoping...you could make them...stronger.”

And now Regulus wants to laugh. “Are you out of your mind? Do you have any idea how dangerous that is?”

She gives him a hard look. “Yes, I do actually. I’ve thought about this a lot, but what we’re doing right now isn’t working and I need this baby.” The desperation in her voice strips it bare of its usual confidence.

“Maybe you don’t,” Regulus says before he can stop himself.

She looks like he’s just slapped her. “You’re being cruel.”

Regulus sighs, dropping his arms. He can feel his stag raise its head, so attuned to his moods, to any sign that he might need a shield. “No I’m not I’m just—you know how I feel about him.”

She takes a step towards Regulus. “This isn’t about him,” she says fiercely.

Now Regulus does laugh, though there’s no humour in it. “Oh come on Narcissa, he’ll be the goddamn father.”

“I will be the one taking care of this child, I’ll raise him, he’ll be so loved Regulus, I promise. It won’t be like it was...” she lets that sentence die.
Like it was for us.

Like it was for you.

Regulus shakes his head, looking away. It’s one thing for the two of them to make this fucked up family on their own, but to ask him to participate? To actively allow it to happen?

“I don’t want any part in this,” he says finally. “You wanna risk your health with an overly potent potion make it yourself.”

“Don’t you think I’ve tried?” she says, sounding close to tears. Regulus hasn’t seen her cry since they were kids. “I’m not good enough, I don’t know anyone who is other than you. Please. Please Regulus this is the only thing I have ever wanted. The only thing I’m allowed to have.” Her words are raw, and as much as he wishes they didn’t affect him they do. She steps forward again, reaching out to him—close enough to touch—and then his Patronus is there. Eyes sharp, head held high, forcing Narcissa to stumble back in surprise.

“Sh, sh,” he says to the animal, not taking his eyes off his cousin as he places a hand on the back of the stag’s neck. “It’s okay, we’re okay.”

“Merlin, I fucking hate that thing,” Narcissa snaps as she rubs quickly at her eyes, getting rid of any evidence of moisture there. As though Regulus hasn’t already seen. As though she

hasn't already laid herself bare for him.

For a long while neither of them say anything.

When Narcissa eventually lifts her eyes he's shocked by the naked pain they hold. "Please Reg," she begs in a weak voice. "I don't know what will happen to me if I fail at this."

And oh, isn't that a fear Regulus knows too well.

His stag crowds closer to him, maybe sensing his distress, the warmth and comfort that always wafts off of him calming Regulus.

"Have they threatened you?" he asks.

She lets out a dry laugh. "Lucius needs an heir, and I am worthless to everyone if I cannot produce one—including to my parents. This is not a good time to be without allies. Not when people so easily go missing." She tilts her head back, closing her eyes and letting her shoulders roll forward. Regulus has never seen her look so defeated. "Besides, I want to be a mother. I want to be one so badly."

It is moments like this, when Regulus knows he's weak.

Weak and pathetic and probably lonely.

Because despite it all, he's always liked Narcissa best. Always thought of her as a sister. A replacement, after Sirius left. There's a part of her, maybe smaller than Regulus, but still there, that doesn't fit the way he doesn't fit. That is miserable the way he is miserable. Not that that's ever meant anything. She's never been there when he needed her. And he knows that if their places were reversed she would have already thrown him out of the room.

It's hard for him to tell, what is normal and what isn't. What is right and what is wrong. He has no barometer for any of it, that was broken in him a long time ago. He thinks this is probably wrong. But then, Narcissa needs help. Her life may depend on it. And Regulus knows that he can help her. More than that. Worse than that. He wants to.

Maybe she'll love you then.

Like a real family.

He knows that isn't what will happen. Yet the childish hope persists.

"Okay," he says finally, even though it feels like swallowing broken glass. Like a betrayal of every part of himself. "I'll do it."

She's moving before he even blinks, he thinks she's going to hug him but she stops just shy of touching him—maybe because of the angry stag at his side.

"Thank you Regulus, thank you, thank you, thank you."

He looks away. He doesn't feel good about this.

“When can you have it ready?” she asks, voice strained.

“It’ll take a week to brew. But I was serious about it being dangerous, there are so many potential side effects to taking a potion with an increased concentration.”

“It’s worth it,” Narcissa says without pause. Regulus can’t help but think of the conversation they’d had years earlier, about the half-blood she could have fallen in love with, but who she gave up, to do what was expected of her. Was that worth it? He wants to ask.

“Come find me in a week then,” he says eventually, when he can’t think of anything else. Out of the corner of his eye he sees Narcissa nod, straightening out her robes before heading towards the door.

“Do you know why?” her voice causes him to jump—he hadn’t been expecting her to speak again. Turning his head he finds she’s stopped at the door, eyes on his Patronus. He waits for her to explain herself but she doesn’t.

“Do I know why, what?”

“Why a stag.”

Regulus blinks before turning to the animal at his side. “I don’t know, is there supposed to be a reason?”

Narcissa rolls her eyes like that’s the dumbest question she’s ever heard and Regulus would be annoyed if he weren’t kind of relieved to see her return to her normal snotty self.

“Of course it means something—it’s meant to represent some part of you. But a stag? Big, brutish animal that goes crashing into things head first? It’s not clever or devious—“

“Is that how you see me?” Regulus asks, mildly amused despite himself. “Clever and devious?”

Narcissa arches her brow. “Is that not how you see yourself?”

Maybe, Regulus doesn’t really know. He does his best, most days, not to see himself at all. To disassociate. Pretend that he isn’t real. That none of it is real.

“He’s strong though,” Regulus doesn’t know why he feels the need to defend his Patronus but he does. “And brave.”

“What are you a bloody Gryffindor?”

Regulus pulls a face that makes Narcissa laugh. “Boy after my own heart,” she says, laughter dying down and leaving them in silence once more.

“Thank you,” she says eventually, and far too earnestly for Regulus’s comfort. “Really.”

He nods. “Okay.”

“I’ll see you next week?”

“Next week.”

This time he watches her leave, the door closing poignantly behind her. He turns to his stag, finding its big, kind eyes already on him. His hand hovers on the top of his head—not resting but still touching.

“I don’t know why I have you,” he whispers, even though no one is around to hear. “But I’m glad I do.”

It might be a trick of the light. But he swears he sees the stag smile.

Chapter End Notes

****Translations in order**** : "Mon rayon de soleil" = My ray of sunshine

"Ne dit pas désolé" = Don't say sorry

"Non, mon chou, j'ai seulement besoin de toi" = No, my darling, I only need you

Oh, wow, hi, hey, hello there!

So I have no patience for writing things that I don't immediately find interesting and thus we have time travel. The future = more drama and more fun.

This chapter is a lot of setting up where they're at two years in the future so I promise there will be more action in the ones coming up. And yes, Regulus and James will meet again!

Thank you all as always, hope this wasn't too much of a shock (or disappointment) !

Chapter 43

Chapter Summary

I've missed you.

Chapter Notes

TW: Referenced child abuse

TW: Drinking

Tw: Violence

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

PART I SIRIUS

Remus isn't home when Sirius gets back from the Ministry. Selfishly, Sirius is angry about that. Not really at Remus, mostly just at the universe. It's late afternoon and Sirius has an itch under his skin that won't go away. He paces around their flat—actually starts doing chores if you can believe it—anything to keep his hands busy. His mind. He doesn't finish any of them though—can't stick with one task for too long before the thoughts start crowding in.

When Sirius was a kid, before Hogwarts, before he had a wand, his mother used to lock him in his room sometimes. When he misbehaved. When she had guests over. When she was tired of him. Now, really, all things considered, that wasn't so bad. His room was, like every room in Grimmauld Place, fairly large and decadent, in a creepy gothic kinda way. The problem was, sometimes she would leave him there for hours. He would try calling out for her. For his father. For Regulus—though he would have been too young to be of any help anyways. But no one would ever answer.

Not knowing when he would be let out again. Thinking he'd been left, abandoned, forgotten. That's what made the walls start to close in. What made his ribs strangle his lungs. Made his eyes sting. It's not that Sirius can't be alone. Of course he can. It's just that on his bad days the silence and the emptiness start to eat at him. And some childish voice screams inside his head;

They're never coming back.

They're never coming back.

They're never coming back for me.

He wants to go out but he knows that if he does he'll end up doing something stupid. End up drunk or arrested or both. It's not that he minds really but then Remus will be angry with him and Sirius doesn't want that right now. Doesn't want to get his attention that way. He just wants him to be here. So he stands at the door, with his jacket and boots on, for a good ten minutes before growling and turning back into the flat.

The dishes are half-washed, the floor half-hoovered, the laundry half-dried. All his partial cleaning has left the place in a right state and none of it has bloody helped. Sirius feels like crawling up the goddamn walls—an army of ants living under his skin, driving him mad. Well, madder. He throws on some music, blasts it as loud as it will go. His fingers drum on every surface they can reach, feet tapping and legs bouncing.

It's ten o'clock at night before he starts getting really worried. Before he stops being able to rationalize this. Because Remus is an eighty-year-old man in a twenty-year-old's body and he never stays out this late. Hell, he barely stays awake this late, always falling asleep on Sirius's shoulder or in his lap.

Sirius has been putting off calling James and Lily because he didn't want to seem needy, or desperate or fucking controlling. As though he needs his boyfriend to be around all the time incase he has an emotional crisis. He was afraid that they would see in his eyes how much he's struggling today, how much Walburga got to him even though he didn't even fucking see her. Afraid they would take one look at him and go "yup, yeah, Moody was right, he can't handle this."

He doesn't give a fuck anymore though. They can see whatever they like. His moony is missing. And he's scared.

"Pads?" James answers. He looks tired.

"Hey, uh—is Rem there? With Lily or you or something?"

James blinks, waking up a little. "No, I haven't seen him since this morning."

Something icy drips down Sirius's spine. "Can you ask Lily if she's heard from him?"

James nods, turning his head over his shoulder; "Lily, can you c'mere?" James shouts before turning back to Sirius. "He didn't come back?"

"Back?" he's currently doing his best to keep his breathing at a regular pace.

"He was meeting with Dumbledore."

"Right," Sirius knew that, because Remus always tells him where he's going and what he's doing and Sirius never remembers and never returns the favour because he's a selfish asshole.

James looks like he's about to say something else but at that moment Lily's voice cuts in; "What's up—oh, hey," and then she's kneeling down, the smile slipping from her face when she takes in Sirius's expression.

“Have you heard from Remus today?” James asks her, not wasting time. To her credit Lily looks only mildly surprised by the question.

“No, not all day, why?”

“Fuck,” Sirius curses before he can stop himself.

Her eyes are back on him, flooded with concern. “What’s going on?”

“No ones seen him since he Floood this morning,” James explains. “Hey Pads, did you call Peter?”

Sirius swallows around the rock in his throat. “No.”

“Okay, you do that and we’ll call Marlene and Dorcas, see if they’ve heard anything. Then we’ll come over, alright?”

He nods numbly, hating the new feeling of foreboding building in his stomach. People go missing almost every day now, what if—

“Sirius,” James’s voice brings him back, his gaze intense even through the fire. “We’re going to find him. He’s going to be okay.”

“Yeah,” Sirius says, because he’s not about to argue.

“We’ll see you soon.”

Sirius takes a deep breath, shaking on the exhale. He needs to get it together, they don’t even know that anything is wrong yet. He’s freaking out for no reason. It’s because of his mother, she put him on edge—set him off—everything is too much right now.

He breathes in and out a few more times before calling Peter.

Nobody answers.

He tries again.

Nobody answers.

“What the fuck Peter!” he shouts at the empty fireplace. “Where the fuck are you?”

He hears a knock on the door and jumps even though he knows it’s James and Lily. They have anti-Apparation charms on the apartment because, well, safety. It had been Remus’s idea, of course.

“Peter isn’t answering his bloody Floo,” Sirius says as he throws open the door.

James frowns, walking in with Lily right behind him, she squeezes Sirius’s arm as she passes.

“Marlene and Dorcas were there but they haven’t seen Remus since last night,” James says flatly.

Part of Sirius isn't even sure this is real. Maybe he's having some kind of psychotic break and this is all a delusion. Because the thought that something terrible has happened to Remus, and he's just been here, fidgeting in their flat, being useless, it makes him want to tear himself in half.

"Fuck it, I'm going to Hogwarts," he grabs his jacket, half-expecting one of them to protest. To tell him it's too late, to wait until morning. He doesn't find it comforting when neither of them do. It means they don't think he's overreacting.

"I'll stay here," Lily says as Sirius shoves on his boots. "In case he Floos or comes back."

James nods. "Keep trying Peter yeah? He'll want to know," she nods as he kisses her on the cheek, meeting Sirius at the front door.

"You can stay too you know," Sirius says, doesn't even know why because he doesn't mean it. If people close to him are going missing he doesn't want to let James out of his sight.

Luckily the other boy just rolls his eyes, shoving Sirius into the stairwell outside. "Come on, we'll Apparate to Hogsmeade and walk from there."

He can't remember the last thing he said to Remus. That's what he keeps thinking as they half-sprint up to the castle. It's nearly pitch black and neither James nor Sirius seem to feel much like talking. So he thinks. Wracks his brain for the answer. He'd been upset after reading Moody's owl—upset maybe isn't the right word—he'd lost it. Honestly he'd probably still been drunk.

Remus had watched him, standing there in the middle of the living room, still in his boxers, no shirt, a pair of socks that were too big for him—probably Sirius's. Watched as Sirius ranted, and paced, and threw things around, haphazardly getting dressed. He can't remember what he'd been saying, but he knows that Remus was there, looking tired and rumpled and worried.

I love you.

Remus had definitely said that, just as Sirius had stepped out the door.

I love you.

But Sirius isn't sure if he said it back—he must have? Right? Just habit if nothing else. There's no way he wouldn't have. Something painful twists his stomach and Sirius has to bite his tongue to keep a pitiful whine from leaving his mouth. But even if he didn't—if in his stupid, half-drunk, frantic state, he didn't say it back, Remus knows, doesn't he? Remus has to know.

"What the hell is this?" Filch—of course it's Filch—greeted them at the front doors, only opening them a crack.

“Move,” Sirius snaps. Dumbledore has given them clearance, has made sure that the wards protecting the school will let them in—for Order business and so forth. Filch knows this, of course, he’s just being a fucking dickhead about it.

“You can’t just come marching in here!” the old caretaker says indignantly.

“Watch me,” Sirius wedges his foot between the door and the wall and uses his shoulder to throw it open, sending the old man sprawling onto his back.

“How dare you! Dumbledore will hear of this—“

“I sure fucking hope so, since he’s the reason we’re here,” he hears James behind him as he takes off in the direction of the headmaster’s office.

Sirius has been back to Hogwarts a few times since graduating but it never feels less jarring. This place that used to belong to him, that held so much of his life, is now foreign—filled with faces he doesn’t recognize and rooms that feel slightly off. A desk that wasn’t there before, a new portrait on the walls, a suit of armour moved. Part of him is jealous, in a lot of ways Hogwarts was the first home he ever had and he doesn’t want some other sticky fingered brat getting his hands all over it—carving his name into the walls. But he can’t stop it. Time goes on. It replaces us.

“Fuck,” Sirius says when he gets to the ugly gargoyle at the entrance to Dumbledore’s rooms. “What’s the password, I can’t remember?”

“Liquorice toffee.”

Immediately the stone groans, turning over to allow them access to the stairway behind. Without a word they start up, Sirius taking the stairs two at a time. He doesn’t bother knocking on the doors to the headmaster’s office, throwing them open with such force that they slam into the walls on the other side.

Part of him, the naive, desperate part, is hoping that he’ll walk in on Remus and Dumbledore having tea or something. Remus’s soft eyes will lift up, brow wrinkling in confusion under his blonde fringe which really is getting too long. ‘Oh,’ he’ll say, ‘is that the time? Sorry, we got carried away.’

And Sirius will be so angry with him. He’ll be fucking furious. But mostly he’ll walk over and get him in his arms and promise to put a fucking tracking spell on him and Remus will laugh and kiss the top of Sirius’s head and tell him he’s sorry and Sirius will forgive him. Because of course he will.

That isn’t what happens.

Instead Sirius storms into a dimly lit office—only a few candles, the fireplace burning low—to find Albus Dumbledore in a midnight blue bathrobe with scattered stars sparkling across it. For a moment the sight of him just standing there, waiting for them, causing Sirius to lose his footing a little.

“The wards?” James speaks first, framing the words as a question though Sirius doesn’t quite understand what he’s asking until Dumbledore answers.

“They let me know you were on your way, yes,” the old man smiles. “I do believe that I told you two you were free to visit whenever you wanted, but this does seem a bit extreme.”

Sirius feels himself wake up. “Where’s Remus?” he demands, without any preamble. He has no interest in social niceties right now.

Dumbledore arches his brow. “I’m not sure I understand the question.”

“The fuck you don’t,” Sirius snarls. “You met with him this morning and no ones seen him since, so where the hell is he?”

Dumbledore’s expression remains impassive. “I’m afraid this isn’t a conversation I can have.”

The fear is a physical presence in Sirius’s chest, pressing against his ribs, begging to eat him alive. “What does that mean? What do you mean you can’t have this conversation?”

“You look tired Sirius,” Dumbledore says instead of answering. “You should go home. Perhaps return in the morning?”

Dumbledore starts towards the door at the back of his office, the one that Sirius assumes leads to his private rooms.

“Don’t you dare, don’t you fucking dare,” he steps forward but James instantly grabs his arm, pulling him back.

“Professor,” James says, ever the boy scout. “Please. We just need to know something. Anything. Are you—you did send him somewhere didn’t you? Can you at least tell us that? That he hasn’t just gone missing?”

There’s a long pause, Dumbledore turning back to face them, gaze drifting from James to Sirius. Sirius doesn’t like the way the old man scrutinizes him, it feels like the way new Order members look at him when they find out he’s a Black. Like he’s something dirty.

“Mr. Lupin is not missing.”

Sirius feels James exhale a sigh of relief behind him but it’s not enough for Sirius. Not nearly enough.

“When will he be back?”

“I don’t know.”

“What is he doing?”

“He’s doing me a favour.”

“Where?”

Dumbledore sighs, though he doesn't sound annoyed, more patronizing. “Go home Sirius.”

“I'm not a child!” he shouts at the old man's retreating back, sounding, regrettably, very much like a child.

Dumbledore ignores him. “The Floo is open,” he gestures to his dwindling fire. “Feel free to use it.” The door closes behind Dumbledore with some finality.

James's hand is still on Sirius's arm, holding him back, always keeping him from starting the fights he can't finish. Normally Sirius is grateful, but right now he reckons it would feel good to be beaten. To be battered and broken. To have fought for this.

“C'mon,” James says eventually, nudging him towards the fireplace. “Lets go.”

Sirius is reluctant to leave, like he thinks that Remus will suddenly appear—pop out from behind the furniture. It's stupid, so eventually he lets James shove him into the embers, muttering his address as the flames swallow him whole.

“Did you get to Dumbledore? What did he say?” Lily asks as James stumbles out of the fireplace moments after Sirius. Sirius walks passed her, placing his palms flat on the back wall and hanging his head, trying to breathe. To keep himself in check.

“Remus is on Order business,” James says.

“Order business? And he didn't bother to tell any of us?”

That question makes everything inside of Sirius shrink and wither and want to die. Remus hadn't bothered to leave a note. To send an owl or a Patronus or fucking anything. He must have known what this would do to Sirius—what it would be like for him to come home to an empty flat.

“I'm going to imagine he had to leave immediately,” James says reasonably, and Sirius appreciates the unimpressed scoff that earns from Lily.

“And Dumbledore? What the hell is his excuse?”

“I don't know,” James admits, “He was being cagey, didn't want to say anything in front of us, like he thought we were being listened to or something. It was... weird.”

“Listened to?”

Sirius's nails dig into the plaster. “He doesn't trust me,” he says, voice wavering.

“Of course he trusts you,” Lily sounds confident and indignant in equal measure. But she must see something on James's face because the next thing she says is; “What reason could he possibly have for not trusting Sirius?”

“You saw it too then?” Sirius asks, still staring at the floor, eyes trained on his feet.

“Yeah,” James repeats after a short pause. “Yeah, I saw it too.”

Sirius grits his teeth. He’s going to lose it. Any second he’s going to lose it.

“Sirius—“ Lily starts, sounding like she’s stepping towards him, which is a bad fucking idea right now.

“Hey, babe, uh—I’ll meet you at home okay?” James cuts her off.

There’s an extended silence during which Sirius can only imagine that they’re communicating with their eyes. It’s one of the few very coupley things they do—becoming all telepathic. He’d be mocking them right now if he didn’t feel like his chest was about to explode.

“Yeah okay,” Lily says finally. “Goodnight Sirius I—come over tomorrow.”

He nods and after a few seconds hears the hissing of the fire as she steps through.

James doesn’t try to say anything.

Doesn’t try to come any closer.

He knows better.

“Do you think he told Remus he couldn’t trust me?”

“Pads—“

“Do you think that’s why he disappeared without a fucking word?” his voice cracks and suddenly he can’t hold it in anymore.

He grabs the picture hanging by his head, ripping it off the wall and sending it smashing to the floor across the room. He goes after the bookshelf next, sending it careening towards the ground, several of Remus’s books flying out. The coffee table loses all its contents—a forgotten glass smashing on the floor, several magazines scattering around, a few more picture frames torn from the walls before Sirius finally stops, standing in the middle of the room, breathing heavy, his vision blurred.

For a moment he thinks James has left, leaving Sirius to throw his little temper tantrum in private, but then the floorboards creek and James is stepping forward. He wraps Sirius in his arms and Sirius wants to snap at him for it, wants to push him away and insist that he doesn’t need this—doesn’t need anyone. But if that’s ever been true—and he isn’t sure that it has—it certainly isn’t now. He deflates in his best friend’s arms, tears coming unwanted to his eyes.

“He’s supposed to be mine,” Sirius whispers. Pathetic and childish. Both not what he means and exactly what he wants to say all at once. He thinks James will call him on it—on being possessive or insecure, both of which would be true—but he doesn’t.

“He is,” James says. “He’ll come back Sirius, he’ll be okay and he’ll come back, but here or not, he’s still yours.” He pauses, and then: “I’ve seen the way he looks at you.”

“Oh fuck off,” Sirius says thickly.

“No way, if I have to stomach seeing it you have to hear it, you have to know. Whatever the hell is going on with Dumbledore, there’s nothing he could say that would take Remus away from you.”

Neither of them point out that that is, actually, exactly what he did.

“Alright,” James sighs as the pair of them pull apart, taking in the chaos surrounding them. “Let’s clean this up so we can go to bed, I’m fucking exhausted.”

Sirius looks over at him, startled. “You’re staying?”

“Obviously,” he says, like it’s nothing. A given. That James would never let Sirius be alone. And the truth is that he hasn’t been alone, not since he took a train at eleven years old and sat beside some specky kid with a smile about ten times too big for his face and a laugh that made Sirius want to be near him.

It’s been a long time since Sirius was a little boy trapped alone in his room, wondering if he’d been forgotten. If anyone was going to come back for him.

Because James always comes.

Always.

“Thank you,” Sirius finds himself blurting out, startling James if his expression is anything to go by. There’s a moment of silence before James reaches over and squeezes his shoulder.

“Of course,” and then; “Now, help me with this bookshelf yeah?” James shoots him a small grin as he nods his head at the furniture in question.

Sirius swallows around the lump in his throat. “Yeah,” he manages. “Yeah okay.”

PART II REGULUS

“Hey buddy!”

Regulus looks up at the sound of Evan’s voice only to find he isn’t talking to him, but to his Patronus. Regulus snorts as he watches his friend awkwardly try to pet the phantom stag. Evan is the only one who doesn’t seem to mind Regulus’s new obsession.

“Do you think he would fetch my wand if I threw it?” Evan asks.

They’re in what was once the cellar of Grimmauld Place and is now a fully operational potions lab. Somehow, Regulus has found himself acting as the Dark Lord’s pharmacist. Blood replenishers? Truth serums? Poisons? Polyjuice? Regulus brews all of it. It started as an accident really, he just...knew how to...and now it’s somehow turned into a near full-time occupation.

“He’s a stag not a dog,” Regulus says, peering into one of the three cauldrons currently boiling in front of him.

It’s not a particularly important position, not high ranking, not sought after. Bellatrix has taken to calling him “the cook”. But the truth is, Regulus likes it. He likes using his brain. Likes being left alone. Likes not seeing the faces of the people he helps kill.

“He needs a name,” Evan goes on, unperturbed.

Regulus rolls his eyes, moving on to the next potion, he stirs it a few times before deciding it needs more mint. “Cerci’s already named him,” he grumbles, because quite frankly, he thinks naming his Patronus is going just a step too far. Evan, on the other hand, seems absolutely tickled by the idea.

“No way? Greengrass? Go on then, what’d she name him?”

Regulus sighs, resigned. “Boo.”

“Ahhh!”

Regulus snorts. “No, she named him Boo.”

Evan’s brow furrows. “Boo?”

“Boo.”

“Like B-O-O?”

“The very same.”

“Huh,” Evan turns back to the stag, scratching behind his ear with a little too much force, sending his hand right through his head. “Whoops—sorry there Boo,” he laughs. “You know what? She might be on to something. It kinda works. Hey Boo!”

“You’re ridiculous,” Regulus says, though he doesn’t quite manage to keep the fondness out of his voice.

“So I’ve been told. Hey, why Boo though? Did she say?”

“Yes,” Regulus drops the crushed herbs into his potion and watches it sizzle and turn a beautiful shade of amber, just like he wanted. “She said it’s because he’s a ghost.”

“Ah,” Evan says wisely. “She’s a smart one that Greengrass.”

“She is.”

Regulus continues to stir his cauldron as Evan walks over and plops himself down on the only available stool. Regulus doesn’t tend to sit much when he’s brewing, especially since he’s always working on more than one thing at a time these days.

“How’s your mum doing then?” Evan asks.

Regulus shrugs without turning around to face him. “Fine, I’d imagine. Back in Scotland, no charges, though they are placing her under surveillance.”

“Did they tell her that?” Evan asks.

“No, I think that would rather defeat the point. Though they’re not very subtle about it so they might as well have. Monitoring this house too—or they would be if they could find it.”

“Mmm, mmm,” Evan says happily. “Gotta love that old house magic—no bloody Ministry cronies are ever gonna find this place.”

Before Regulus can respond the door to the cellar bangs open and there is the unmistakable sound of Barty stomping down the stairs. Regulus looks at Evan, brow arched.

“Speak of the Devil and he shall appear.”

Evan stifles a laugh as Barty walks in in his Ministry robes, hurling his suitcase across the room and collapsing onto the floor, back pressed to the wall. “I swear to Slytherin if my father makes me file one more goddamn report I will lose it. Fuck being a double agent, I will Avada the entire Ministry.”

“Seems a bit extreme that,” Evan says nonchalantly. In fairness, Barty goes on almost this exact rant at least once a week. The Dark Lord decided that he would be most useful if his connection to the cause remained unknown, especially to his father. Which is how he’s ended up working a desk job.

“Well it’s the plan anyway isn’t it?” Barty grumbles. “Why don’t we just get on with it already?”

“I reckon we’re hoping we won’t have to kill ALL of them. At least some ought to convert over, don’t you think Reg?”

Regulus offers a noncommittal grunt in response, back to fiddling with his potions—one of which being the fertility potion he promised Narcissa. It’s nearly ready.

“Don’t know why,” Barty goes on. “Bunch of pansy blood traitors, what the hell do we need them for?”

“Dunno,” Evan muses. “Chores probably.”

That actually gets a laugh out of Barty. “Yeah alright, fair enough—agh.” Regulus looks over his shoulder to see his Patronus pawing at Barty’s feet. “Fuck Reg, is that thing really necessary?” he inches away from it, eyeing it with distrust.

“Excuse you Barty, he has a name,” Evan says with mock outrage.

Oh here we go.

Barty looks thoroughly unimpressed by this. “A name?”

“Yup. It’s Boo.”

“You named it Boo?” he turns an outraged face on Regulus, as though he can’t believe he’d ever have such poor taste. But Regulus only holds up his hands in a show of innocence.

“Don’t look at me. I didn’t name him anything.”

Barty swings his gaze back to Evan.

“Nah, wish it was me. It was Greengrass.”

“Cerci Greengrass?” Regulus does not trust the new interest in Barty’s voice.

“Don’t start,” he warns as he goes back to chopping.

“Start what? I’m not starting anything. I just wanna know if you’re finally willing to admit you’re fucking her?”

“I’ve told you a hundred times,” Regulus says as he scrapes his minced newt eyes into a small bowl. “We’re just friends.”

“Mate, she named your bloody Patronus.”

“Without my permission!”

“Listen, it’s nothing to be ashamed of. She’s not bad looking really, I mean, a bit odd, but as long as her mouth works—“

Regulus’s hand freezes, still wrapped around a knife. “I’m gonna need you to shut-up now.”

“What? I’m just—“

“Barty, I think what our gentlemanly comrade here is trying to say, is that he’s not one to screw and tell,” Evan butts in before Barty can dig himself a deeper hole.

Barty rolls his eyes. “Whatever. Don’t see why he has to be such a fucking dweeb about it.”

“I’m right here,” Regulus says flatly.

Barty fixes him with a look before clearing his throat. “I don’t understand why YOU have to be such a fucking dweeb about it. Better?”

“You know what I think your problem is Bartholomew?”

Barty glares at Evan. “That’s not my name.”

“Not sure Bartemius is better,” Regulus says under his breath.

“Your problem,” Evan goes on, loud enough that neither of the other boys can talk over him, “is that you need to get laid.”

Barty’s expression only sours further. “Fuck you.”

“Still not my type.”

“Jesus Christ Evan!”

“I’m just saying,” Evan goes on, undeterred. “We should go out,” he looks between Regulus and Barty, neither of whom seem overly excited by this idea. “Lads night, c’mon, we’re young, and hot, and horny.”

“Jesus CHRIST Evan,” Barty repeats, and Regulus finds himself agreeing.

“Think about it okay?” he says. “I know this great place, it—“

“Oi!” A voice calls down from above, causing all three of them to swivel towards the staircase. Light beams in from the open door. “Meeting’s starting, move your asses.” Whoever it is—Regulus never has any idea who the hell is in this house—they don’t wait for an answer, the sound of the cellar door slamming shut echoing down the stairs before any of them say a word.

“Well,” Evan claps his hands together as he gets to his feet. “Duty calls I suppose.” While he helps Barty up Regulus takes care of his potions—casting a Stasis charm over one of them and setting the other two to simmer.

When they emerge on the main floor they are immediately carried off by the stream of people heading for the dining room. Salmon swimming upstream. There’s no telling exactly how many will turn up when the Dark Lord calls. Most are busy—those like Barty who are still pretending to be on the other side can’t be disappearing all the time, and several people have been sent off to other countries on recruiting missions. Still, there are certainly constants: Bella, Rodolphus, Rabastan, Lucius—when she was still in the city Walburga never missed a meeting, but now she’s rarely in attendance. Regulus is always present. Partially because it’s his house and partially because he rarely goes out anymore, except to visit his parents. Evan and Barty are usually there too, along with Snape, Mulciber, and Avery—all too new not to do everything in their power to show their devotion to the Dark Lord.

They file into the large, uninviting room. Regulus recognizes most faces but not all of them. He isn’t sure if that’s the result of polyjuice or if they are genuinely new people. He also doesn’t care.

“Hey-o Sevy,” Evan says as he sits next to Snape for some godforsaken reason.

“Rosier,” Snape says. He’s looking a little rough around the edges, not that he ever looked anything else, but it’s clear that servicing his Lord is weighing on him—hair grown out nearly passed his shoulders, bags underneath his eyes, skin pale.

“Haven’t seen you around recently, where you been?” Evan still sounds chipper even though his eyes are sharp. That’s the thing about Evan. He wants you to underestimate him.

Snape’s beady eyes stare back at him. “Above your pay grade I expect.”

Evan laughs, big and boisterous. “Do you get a salary Sevy? Is the Dark Lord paying your rent? How very working class of you.”

Regulus thinks he can see the muscles twitching in Snape’s jaw. His eyes sweep Evan up and down, disgust clear on his face. “Be careful Rosier. I have made myself indispensable. You and your friends,” at this his eyes flick to Regulus, “have not.”

If Regulus was the type to care about rank he might be offended. But as it is, he simply meets Snape’s gaze, staring blankly back at him.

“Aw cute,” Evan says as he tilts his head to the side. “You see Severus, some of us don’t need to prove our worth,” he leans slightly closer to the greasy black haired prick. “Some of us have it running through our veins,” Evan smiles then. “You’re a half-blood right?”

Several emotions flicker across Snape’s face and Regulus is almost positive that Evan is about to get punched but before the situation can escalate any further the doors to the dining room are once again thrown open and all talking ceases.

The room feels colder, but Regulus isn’t sure if that’s real or just in his head, as he watches the figure of the Dark Lord take his seat at the end of the table. Now that he can see his face Regulus finds himself surprised by the Dark Lord’s appearance. His skin is sallow, hair thin, and something about the rest of him—blurry is the only way Regulus can think to describe it.

“Does he look off to you?” he whispers under his breath.

Evan gives him an amused look. “You calling the Dark Lord ugly?”

Regulus rolls his eyes, letting the subject drop, though he can’t quiet the feeling of unease in his stomach. Because the Dark Lord doesn’t look sick, that isn’t right, it’s something else. Something Regulus can’t quite put his finger on.

Voldemort smiles at his followers, opening his arms. “Welcome my comrades, what a joy to see so many faces here, your loyalty and commitment are valued. Now, shall we begin?”

Largely, meetings like this are rather dull. A lot of the everyday minutia of staging a coup—scheduling, finances, inventory. What do they have? What do they need? What have they accomplished since the last meeting? Because Regulus spends all of his time in the cellar brewing potions most of it doesn’t apply to him. So instead he takes stock of who’s in attendance, of how frequently they come, who they sit with, talk to, who the Dark Lord pays more attention to. Then afterwards he scribbles it all down in his journal. Collecting information like this makes him feel like he still has some sort of control. That he isn’t just blindly following along. Even though it’s not like he has any plans to do anything. He’s not really that kind of person. The kind who acts.

It's the mention of his mother's name that snaps Regulus back to attention.

"After what happened to Walburga we have to be more strategic about how we get our supplies," Lucius is saying. "No one at this table is able to just walk into Knockturn unnoticed. Thanks to Moody the Aurors are watching us like hawks and arresting us on any charge."

"What does it matter?" asks some man Regulus doesn't recognize, he has a monocle and a goatee that's so long it disappears below the table. "We have control of Azkaban, even if they're able to charge us, which is doubtful, they can't hold us."

A grumbling of agreement circulates around the room causing Lucius's gaze to narrow. He clearly does not appreciate being questioned.

"Every time they arrest us our goods are confiscated. Free or not, we are running low on important supplies."

There are more grumblings, a few people spit out curses—most about the Aurors generally, some about Alastor Moody specifically. The Dark Lord merely nods his head. "And what is your solution Lucius?"

"We raid the stores at night. Take what we need in one go and without being seen."

A few people slam their hands on the tabletop to show their support, but most watch the Dark Lord, waiting for his reaction before they express themselves either way.

"My source tells me that they're expecting us to make a move just like that," he says finally.

Evan, Regulus and Barty all make eye contact, smirking at one another. It's become something of an inside joke, the Dark Lord's "source". If something unexplained happens—if the floorboards creak or the wind slams the doors, they all look at one another and say "the source" "it was the source". The Dark Lord has been mentioning the illusive "source" for weeks now, but as far as Regulus knows no one has any idea who it is, just that they're in the Order of the Phoenix.

"The Aurors are expecting this?" Lucius asks eventually, looking surprised. "We haven't heard—"

"The Order is expecting this," the Dark Lord cuts him off. "They know that the Aurors are making it more difficult for us to purchase our supplies so they've set up guard posts in Knockturn Alley," the Dark Lord smiles then, at the look of dejection on Lucius's face. "No need to look so morose Lucius. You're right, we cannot continue to operate as individuals, we must behave as a team. An army. The Order may be guarding supplies but they aren't expecting a fight, they think they'll be faced with one of us, maybe two, and they're spread thin, trying to cover all their bases. So we'll send in a team, wipe out their pathetic guard with ease, and take what we need."

Now the banging is deafening as nearly every member starts slamming their hands on the table in support. In excitement.

"Dolohov," The Dark Lord turns to the brutish man on his right. "I want you to lead it, with Yaxley, Crabbe, Lee, Snyder," there's a brief pause, "and Black."

Regulus feels his whole body go stiff, almost certain he's misheard, he can feel every head turn in his direction. He's never been sent out on a mission before. Thankfully, he has enough presence of mind to hold back the "Me?" that's dancing on his tongue. But the Dark Lord goes on like he knows exactly what's happening inside Regulus's head.

"I want someone there who knows what we need, who can identify ingredients."

Regulus knows everyone is waiting for him to speak but his throat feels impossibly tight all of a sudden. Barty kicks him under the table and Regulus finally manages to swallow.

"Yes my lord," he croaks. "It will be my honour."

The Dark Lord smiles. "Excellent, that's what I wanted to hear."

Regulus's head is spinning as the meeting moves on to other topics. Words fly about the room but he doesn't register them until Evan leans over and whispers in his ear.

"We are so getting wasted tonight."

Regulus is still in a daze when the meeting ends. That's the only way he can explain the fact that he doesn't put up a fight when Evan drags him and Barty from the house and Apparates them to some grimy club in the middle of London.

It's magic, the club, covered in spells to repel Muggles and draw in Wizards. It's only as Evan is shoving him into a black leather booth that Regulus realizes he's never been to a club before. He hates it about as much as he always imagined he would. There are too many people, they push up against him, sweat on him, touch and grab without permission.

He sees a pair of girls with charmed wings on their backs, belligerently flapping people in the face, and a man who's clearly taken a growth potion to make himself taller but overshot and now towers above the crowd at what must be nearly eight feet. It might not be a potion of course, he might be part giant, but Regulus doesn't think his bone structure looks right.

He blinks as Evan drops into the seat across from him, noticing, for the first time, that Barty isn't with them anymore. Evan slides a condensation covered glass towards him and as if reading his mind says; "Over there, caught her on the way in."

Regulus follows his gaze and finds Barty entangled with a blue haired girl on the dance floor. That was fast.

"Maybe he actually will get laid," Regulus says flatly, earning him a laugh from Evan as he raises his own glass.

"Come on, cheers me."

Regulus arches his brow. “Why?”

Evan makes a big show of rolling his eyes. “We’re celebrating, obviously, you’re going on your first mission!” he puts on a voice; “I’ve never been so proud.”

Something squirms in Regulus’s stomach. “Oh,” he says tightly, clinking his glass against Evan’s and taking a swallow of the painfully sweet liquid inside.

Evan smiles. “Not a cocktail man eh?”

Regulus makes a face. “What the fuck is in this?”

“Beats me, it’ll get you blitzed though.”

Regulus only shakes his head, looking back out at the crowd. He doesn’t recognize the music— isn’t even sure if it is music—it’s so loud it sounds like the speakers have blown out, it’s just noise now, with a vague beat underneath.

“You come here a lot?” Regulus finally asks.

Evan shrugs. “Every once and a while, when I need to blow off steam.”

Regulus can’t really understand how coming to this place could feel cathartic to anyone, but then, Evan is a special sort.

“How’s the girlfriend?” Regulus pushes, mostly because he needs to focus on something other than the pulsing headache he can feel building behind his eyes.

“She’s fine,” Evan says.

“She okay with you coming here?” If nothing else, his father will appreciate hearing about Evan’s relationship drama when he goes to visit him tomorrow.

“Never said we were exclusive,” Evan sends him a smirk but Regulus only stares skeptically back at him.

“Does SHE know you’re not exclusive?”

Anyone else would get angry but Evan only laughs. “Oh come on Reg, give a man a break yeah? What are you, the relationship expert?”

There are small flashes—a hidden room, warm hands and mouths and too many promises—Regulus looks away. “No.”

They sit in silence for a while, watching the club move around them. If nothing else, this place is certainly excellent for people watching. Of course, eventually Regulus finds his eyes lingering a little too long on a good looking man by the bar. He’s probably got an inch or two on Regulus, floppy brown hair, big smile. Regulus isn’t really thinking about why he’s lingered on this particular person until their eyes meet and something sparks low in his stomach.

It's been a long time since anyone's looked at him like that.

"You could go over and talk to him you know?"

Regulus's head snaps towards Evan so fast he feels a sharp pain lancing through his neck. The panic is immediate. Years in the making.

"Aw come on Reg, don't look at me like that," Evan says. Regulus has no idea how he's looking at Evan or if it properly conveys the icy fear currently crawling up his spine. He's been so careful, his whole life he's been so careful. Not that there's been much to be careful about—not for a long time. He doesn't understand what he did to give himself away.

Evan sighs, leaning slightly closer so that he can lower his voice, not that anyone could hear him over the noise in this place anyway. "We've been friends since we were—what? Seven? Eight?" When Regulus doesn't react he pushes on. "I know when you're looking at someone Regulus."

He thinks this is supposed to be comforting but it's actually a terrifying thing for Evan to say. A million questions and fears flood Regulus's mind but somehow he eventually manages to find his voice.

"And that's...you're okay with...it?" Me. Is what he means. You're okay with me. Not that it matters. Not that he cares. It would just be inconvenient—he'd rather not give people things to hold over his head. He's been in that position too many times before. That's the only reason he's asking. Obviously.

Evan smiles almost...softly? Which is weird and actually makes Regulus feel mildly uncomfortable, like they're having some kind of moment or something. "Yeah man, of course it is. But I get why you, y'know, why you don't want people to know. Like Barty. Your cousins," he looks at Regulus seriously then. "I won't tell anyone."

And damn it.

Damn it Evan.

Because they totally are having a moment.

"Thank you," he's not even sure if Evan can hear him because the words come out so softly. But he must be able to read Regulus's lips because his smile grows.

"Don't mention it," he leans back, arm thrown over the booth, taking a sip from his drink before he speaks again.

"Merlin, it must have been torture for you."

Regulus arches his brow. "What must have?"

Evan's smile has taken on a rather impish quality. "Having to stare at all this every day," he gestures to himself and Regulus actually laughs.

“You wish.”

“Oh come on Reg, you were totally pining after me. Not that I blame you. I’d want to fuck me too.”

Regulus shakes his head still laughing. “I pity your girlfriend.”

“Don’t be jealous Reg, our love was never meant to be,” he gives him a wink and then, before Regulus can respond; “He’s still looking y’know,” he nods his head in the direction of the bar.

Regulus looks down briefly, stomach squirming. “Too dangerous—Barty might see.” Not to mention the hundreds of other people packed inside this place.

“I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but Barty’s pretty distracted,” and when that doesn’t work; “Go on Reg. We’re young and hot and you deserve better than a fucking cellar and a Patronus.”

Well. When he puts it like that. It does sound rather pathetic doesn’t it? The truth is, he’s not sure he could do it. Pick someone up, that is. I mean, sure, he could probably convince someone to go to bed with him but...he’s almost certain he would start to panic once they were there.

You could ignore it,

offers the voice in the back of his mind.

You’ve done it before. You know how to shut it off. How to stop feeling.

But why? Why bother? If I don’t have to?

For a moment it seems the little voice has no reply. And then,

So you can be normal.

Regulus’s hand clenches around his drink before he lifts it to his mouth and chugs the rest of it down. Evan lets out a low whistle.

“Damn, okay.”

Regulus gets up. “I’m getting another drink.”

“Mhm, I bet you are,” Evan sounds far too smug, swatting at Regulus’s ass as he walks away from the table, surprised to find himself a little unsteady on his feet. He didn’t think the drink was that strong but he hasn’t had alcohol in a while and he also can’t remember the last time he ate...

He maneuvers through the crowd doing his best not to flinch as people bump into him. He’s flying a bit blind, trying to spot the boy from before through the sea of moving figures around him. He thinks he has a pretty good idea of which direction to head in. He’s not exactly sure what his plan is here. He’ll have to drink more if he wants to be able to take his clothes off,

and obviously he can't bring someone back to Grimmauld so hopefully this bloke has somewhere they can go. Regulus wonders if he'll have to dance with him? The thought makes him shudder. Too many bodies and people and hands. Hands on him. He grits his teeth.

He can do this.

He can be normal.

A mess of wild dark hair suddenly comes into view, stopping Regulus dead in his tracks. He thinks he sees the flash of a pair of glasses but then the head is turned and he can't be sure. But it looks like—fuck, it looks just like—

“James?” the name comes out of his mouth weak and whiny, for the first time he's glad the music is so obnoxiously loud in this place because he's fairly certain no one heard him.

His whole body starts to tremble as he takes a step forward. It's been two years. It's been so fucking long. If it is James—and Merlin he knows it makes no sense, that it can't be, I mean, right?—but if it is James, he's not even sure he'd want to speak to him. What would they even say to one another?

Hi. Hey. Hello.

I've missed you.

Oh God I've missed you.

I've kept us safe James, all those moments, all those words, all those touches. I see them everyday. I sit with them. They sit with me. Have you ever seen a stag? I don't know why that's the shape we take but it is. And he's so beautiful. Just like you.

Oh God I've missed you.

He's nearly reached him now, if he stretches his arm out he might even be able to—

The man turns around, nearly bumping right into Regulus.

“Whoops,” he laughs, two pints in hand. He is wearing glasses, though they're ugly thick rimmed things. “Sorry mate,” he smiles apologetically as he squeezes past Regulus.

Not James.

Regulus tries to get himself under control, tries to settle his racing pulse.

Of course it wasn't James.

You knew it wouldn't be.

You knew.

He's not sure why he feels so sick, adrenaline suddenly draining out of him, leaving something hollow in its place.

"Hey!"

Regulus takes in a deep breath and exhales. He should probably get some water or something. Fuck he really wishes he hadn't chugged the rest of that drink it isn't helping.

"Er—hi?"

Regulus blinks, suddenly realizing the voice in his periphery is speaking to him. He turns around, and because the universe is a cruel and relentless bitch, he finds the boy from earlier, smiling sheepishly at him.

He looks nice.

Handsome.

"Hi," he says again, and then; "I'm Michael."

If Regulus was actually normal, he'd probably like Michael. Probably dance with him. Go home with him. And he wouldn't have to get drunk to do it. Wouldn't have to retreat inside himself to ignore the way being touched makes him want to crawl out of his skin.

But he isn't normal.

He's not sure if he would have been, if life had been different. Maybe he always would have been this way.

"I have to go," he mutters, turning away quickly as he sees the disappointment flicker across Michael's face. He shoves people out of his way on his desperate dash towards the exit, stumbling out into the street.

Evan will figure out he's gone home eventually, or he'll think he went home with that boy, either way Regulus doesn't care, he just needs out. He just needs to go home. He just needs the fucking weight in his chest to let up. He doesn't know why his heart feels like it's breaking. Nothing even happened.

Hi. Hey. Hello.

I've missed you.

Oh God I've missed you.

Regulus squeezes his eyes shut. Fuck it. Fuck the Statute of Secrecy, fuck the fact that he shouldn't Apparate drunk. He can't be here. He can't.

And so.

By the next breath.

He isn't.

PART III JAMES

The Order is meeting at Cardoc Dearborn's house today. Dumbledore likes to keep the locations of the meetings new, only ever giving them out the day of, for security purposes. James has never been to Dearborn's house. He's one of the older members of the Order and his home is in the suburbs outside of London and covered in portraits of his ancestors. The Dearborn's are a rather old and well known family and so they're all very lofty and chatty and don't seem to at all appreciate the large crowd now attempting to fit itself into the sitting room.

James is leaning against the window—the only part of the house that doesn't appear to have a face stuck to it—Lily is perched on the arm of the sofa next to him, Sirius standing with his arms crossed over his chest on his other side. It's been a week now, with no word from Remus, no idea where he's gone or what's happened except that Dumbledore, presumably, had something he needed him to do. James has spent most nights at Remus and Sirius's flat. He knows his best mate. Knows how he gets when he's alone. Especially with Walburga being allowed to walk free.

It's been a pretty shit week all things considered.

“James!”

He looks up to see his parents making their way through the crowd—of course they get stopped about a dozen times by people wanting to say hello. When they finally reach him James can see the irritation in his mother's eyes and he has to bite back a smile.

“Oh it's so good to see you,” she immediately throws her arms round Sirius who only freezes for a second before he starts hugging her back.

“Hi Mrs. Potter,” Sirius says thickly.

“Oh don't start,” she pulls back bringing her hands up to cup his face and James finds himself startled to realize that Sirius is taller than her. I mean, obviously he knew that, logically, but he's never really noticed it before. She always just feels so...big.

“It's Effie or mum, you know that.”

James sees Sirius struggle to keep his expression neutral. “Yeah, of course,” his mum has always been the only person who can make Sirius go quiet.

She brushes his cheeks with her thumbs, eyes soft. “How're you holding up sweetheart?”

James isn't sure what his mum knows about Sirius and Remus's relationship. No one's said anything to her, as far as James knows, but she's not an idiot. She's seen them together. Knows they share a flat. He's not sure why they haven't told her directly, it's not as though

she'd react badly, but James figures that's really up to Sirius, and Sirius would never do anything he thought might cost him Effie.

Sirius clears his throat. "I'm alright," he says, with a casualness that feels forced. "Y'know, getting through."

Euphemia nods, holding still for one more second before she pulls him forward and kisses the top of his head, finally letting him go. "You should come visit, you know you're welcome anytime, you don't need to wait for this lump to invite you," she smacks James's arm playfully.

"Oi!" he says indignantly, noticing Lily trying to hide her giggles behind her hand.

"Well she's right," his father says. "You don't Floo, you don't write, sometimes I forget what you look like."

James rolls his eyes. "Yeah, yeah."

"Dinner," his mother says sternly, finger pointing directly at James.

"Lunch."

"James."

"Breakfast."

"Really?"

"What?" he says innocently, noticing his father trying to hide his grin. "I thought we were just naming meals." His mother doesn't dignify this with a response, just stares him down until he eventually caves.

"Alright, alright, I'll come fore dinner, jeez."

"A real hardship," his father says wryly, reaching over to muss James's hair like he's still ten years old. James bats his hand away, cheeks going red. Merlin he hopes no one is watching, his parents are so bloody embarrassing.

"Sunday evening, yes?" Euphemia continues.

"Alright, alright, Sunday, dinner, got it."

She nods, satisfied. "I expect to see all of you there," she looks at the three of them. "You included Lily dear."

Lily smiles. "Wouldn't miss it."

"We can finish our tour of James's baby photos," his father mock whispers to her, causing James to glare.

“And ask Peter when you see him, he’s invited too of course,” Euphemia goes on, James is just grateful she doesn’t mention Remus, Sirius is actually looking somewhat happy for the first time in days.

“Course, I’ll tell him.”

“Fleamont!” someone calls from across the room, causing James’s father to turn.

“Ah,” he says, resigned, “business calls,” he gives James’s arm a distracted squeeze before pulling away, heading off towards someone James doesn’t recognize—probably from the Ministry.

His mother gives them all one more hug, squeezing James extra tight. “I love you,” she whispers, kissing his temple, before moving on to Lily and then disappearing after his father.

“Merlin, they’re a lot,” James mutters as he tries fruitless to get his hair back in order.

“They’re brilliant,” Lily says from beside him.

James looks down at her and then across the room at where his parents are clearly having some very serious, important conversation. Not that they ever have any other kind these days.

“I mean, yeah, obviously. Still a lot though.”

She snorts, reaching over and squeezing his hand.

A flustered string of mumbled apologies drags James’s attention away from Lily and towards the slightly frazzled, sweaty figure of Peter, awkwardly maneuvering his way towards them.

“Think he ran here?” Sirius asks, watching their friend struggle to get around an oblivious Hagrid.

“Sure bloody looks like it.”

“Should we let him know he’s a wizard?”

“Dunno, might be a bit of a shock for him.”

Sirius chuckles as Peter finally manages to make it over to them.

“Hey Petey, aren’t you looking wonderfully sweaty today.”

Peter glares at Sirius. “Sorry, got stuck late at work.”

Peter’s mother insisted he get a job with his father in the Department of Magical Accidents and Catastrophes. ‘He should fit right in’ Sirius had said when he heard, ‘seeing as he is one.’ James actually felt bad about laughing that time.

“Oi, Sunday night, dinner at my parents place,” James says before he forgets. Peter looks like he’s about to refuse but James cuts him off. “Nope, no, no getting out of this one. If you don’t

show my mum will never shut up about it so you're coming. Just deal with it. Besides, I feel like we haven't seen you in ages anyway."

Peter sighs, "It's work, there's just... a lot to do," he leans back against the wall behind him, earning him an indignant squawk from the portrait he smothered.

"I beg your pardon!" the old woman in the frame demands, causing Peter to jump.

"Oh shit, er, sorry ma'am," his face is on fire, James and Sirius cackling on either side of him.

"Oh shut it," Peter mutters, crossing his arms over his chest but making sure to stay a safe distance away from the wall.

"Good evening everyone," the slightly magnified voice of Albus Dumbledore cuts through the room, instantly silencing all chatter and causing everyone to turn towards the entrance where the old man is standing in magenta robes. He smiles out at them.

"I think it is time we begin, I know you are all busy people and I don't wish to drag you away from your lives for longer than is necessary."

James hears Sirius scoff next to him, "What lives?"

James elbows him even though he secretly agrees. Between the meetings and missions and patrols there isn't really much outside of the Order. Of course, you can't really blame Dumbledore for that. He's not the one attacking people. Killing people.

James lets his eyes wander around the room as he listens to Dumbledore talk. No news on the kidnap victims, Moody suggests they presume them dead, James is sure most of them already have. Azkaban is essentially useless at keeping its prisoners locked up at this point so there's some talk of the Order opening its own prison. Not on the same scale, of course, but some place they can reliably detain potential Death Eaters and sources.

All the members aren't here for this particularly depressing meeting. Alice and Frank are notably absent, so are Marlene and Dorcas—all on guard duty. Moody has made it nearly impossible for anyone suspected of colluding with Voldemort to buy anything magical. It's one of the few roadblocks they've actually been able to put in the Death Eaters' way. All major sellers of magical ingredients and objects have been detailed with security—a mixture of Aurors and Order members. So far there's been nothing to report, but it's spreading their manpower pretty bloody thin.

Speaking of...

"McKinnon is going to need back up on her shift tonight," Moody announces gruffly.

"What happened to Gideon?" Lily demands.

Moody growls, rolling his eyes. "Idiot went and touched some bloody cursed tea kettle or some shite on his last shift and now he's in Mungo's vomiting up butterflies."

“Butterflies?” James and Sirius say at the same time, barely containing their glee.

“Yeah, yeah, you’ll have an excellent time taking the piss out of him when he gets back, but spare the rest of us, okay? Now, any volunteers?”

A deathly silence falls over the room, no one willing to give up their evening to babysit a bunch of potion ingredients. Eventually, James sighs.

“I’ll do it,” he says, it’s not like he’s going to let Marlene do a shift on her own.

“Thank you Potter,” though somehow Moody manages to make even his gratitude sound disapproving.

He feels Lily tug on his sleeve as Moody moves on to other topics.

“You sure?” she asks quietly.

“Course,” he gives her a reassuring smile. It’s really not the most dangerous task they’re given as members of the Order but James knows it doesn’t matter. Every time Lily walks out the door he feels anxiety roll through him. Safe just isn’t something they feel these days.

“It’ll be good to see Mar, catch up on the gossip,” he leans over and kisses Lily quickly.

“Make sure you tell her to give me back the jumper she stole the last time she was over,” Lily says playfully, though the tension in her eyes hasn’t quite disappeared.

James snorts. “Will do.” He turns his attention back to Moody but he can’t shake the feeling that someone’s watching him and when he turns his head he finds it’s Peter.

“All good Pete?” he asks, his friend’s eyes instantly dropping to the floor.

“Yup,” he says, though his voice sounds tense and he’s started to fidget; bouncing on the balls of his feet, pulling at his sleeve.

“Hey,” James knocks their shoulders together. “It’s just a guard shift, no need to look so bloody worried. It’s going to be boring as fuck.”

Peter looks up at him and then away again. “Yeah...yeah I know. Just...yeah. In a weird mood I suppose. Sorry.”

“Don’t be,” James says, and he means it. “We all get like that these days.”

Peter nods. “Yeah,” he says again, but he doesn’t sound like he quite believes it. Normally James would push him a little more, find out what’s really wrong, but this isn’t the place.

Sunday, he thinks, at dinner. I’ll talk to him then.

He's never been to the shop they're guarding, not that he's exactly a regular in Knockturn. James has always thought it was weird that this area wasn't better policed before the war but according to Alice there are a lot of Ministry officials who have side hustles going on down here they'd rather not come to light. The smuggling and selling of illegal artifacts, under the table gambling rings etc., Turns out there's a lot of money to be made on the black market. At this point though, Moody is far beyond caring about the feelings of a few greedy politicians, and with Dumbledore backing him no one is saying shit.

There are still people out on the street even though it's close to midnight, there are lamps here and there but they're pretty spread out, it's clear the intention was to keep this area dark. Still, the figure of Marlene leaning against the front of a crumbling building is hard to miss.

"Wow Potter," she says teasingly the moment she sees him. "You're late, the day shift left half an hour ago."

"Nice try," James says, opening his arms and giving her a hug. "I passed them on my way in you little weasel."

She smiles as she pulls away. "Sure you did," and then, more sincerely. "Merlin I'm so glad it's you, I was worried I was going to get stuck with Fletcher," she makes a face that has James laughing.

"Fletch is alright," he says as he watches Marlene unlock the front door and then follows her inside.

"Maybe to you, but I'd rather not spend the whole bloody night with him staring at my ass."

"Fair enough."

The shop is, predictably, dark. The owners of these establishments aren't pleased by the new police presence being forced on them and interact with them as little as humanly possible, despite countless reassurances that they aren't there looking for illegal items, just protecting them. To be fair, James isn't sure he'd buy that either.

"So," he says, hopping up on the counter as Marlene lights one of the lanterns, "Gideon got cursed huh?"

Marlene rolls her eyes. "He was such a baby about it too, whinging and complaining and—"

"Vomiting butterflies?"

She smiles. "Moody told you that bit huh?" she twirls her wand between her fingers. "He begged me to make up something "cooler," like there's a cool thing to vomit."

"I mean, you do have to admit, as far as cursed objects go, butterflies isn't particularly hardcore."

"Which he should be grateful for!" she says with exasperation. "Besides...the butterflies were really rather beautiful."

“Reckon they’ll let him keep one of them as a pet?”

She snorts. “Merlin, I hope not, poor butterfly. Can you imagine being stuck with Gideon? Just doing these shifts with him a few times a week has been insufferable.”

“Speaking of, you been watching this place long?” James asks.

She shrugs. “The last week or so.”

James slides off the counter. “Well then, care to give me a tour?”

“Of course, here we have our dusty showroom,” Marlene gestures widely at the small space. There isn’t much; a few shelves, the till, some plants growing in the window that James vaguely remembers from Herbology.

“This is basically all the above board stuff, your run of the mill potions ingredients,” she waves her wand as she walks through the door behind the counter, causing the lantern to trail beside them. “Back here is where things get interesting.”

“Holy shit,” James stumbles against the wall as he’s met with the sight of about a dozen or so skeletons.

Marlene stands in front of him unfazed. “Charming isn’t it?”

He looks from her to the skeletons and back again. “Are those…”

“Real?” she asks. “Oh yeah. Hundred percent.”

“How…” it seems that James has gone momentarily dumb, only able to manage two words at most.

“Oh don’t worry, the shopkeeper isn’t a murderer or anything, just a grave robber,” she says flatly. “He was very quick to make sure I knew that.”

James swallows. “You’ve met him?”

“Only once, the first day, when he gave me these,” she holds up a dangly set of keys. “He also made sure I knew, in case I was still feeling squeamish about the whole thing, that they aren’t Wizard skeletons.”

James doesn’t quite understand what she means and then; “Muggles?”

Marlene nods.

“Jesus Christ.”

“Yup,” Marlene is eying them with relative distaste.

James forces himself to step away from the wall, standing straight again and working on swallowing the bile at the back of his throat. “Why does he have them at all?”

“Turns out human bone is a very powerful potion ingredient,” she looks over at him. “Slughorn must have forgotten to mention that one.”

James lets out a startled laugh, still feeling shaky. “Yeah, no kidding.”

Marlene walks past the hanging skeletons towards another door on the other side of the room that James had failed to notice. He’s not exactly sure he wants her to open it but he isn’t about to tell her not to, so he grits his teeth as he watches her turn the knob. Thankfully, all it reveals is a set of stairs.

James grimaces, walking over. “Do I even wanna know what’s down there?”

“Bit of a let down after this room honestly,” she says with a wane smile. “Bunch of illegal plants, things that don’t grow here, that you can’t import. Big deal for potions nerds I guess but compared to those,” she nods her head over her shoulder. “Hard to feel particularly shocked by it.”

“Hmm,” is all James says, avoiding looking at the skeletons as he follows Marlene back into the main room.

“This is the only entrance though,” she goes on, pointing at the front door. “No other outside doors, and no other windows. No fireplace so there’s no Floo connection and we put up anti-Apparation charms on all these places months ago.”

James nods, shaking off his jitters and trying to focus. “So if someone is coming in here, it’s gonna be through there,” he says, earning him a nod from Marlene. “Well, that’s simple.”

“Has been so far. Like everywhere else we’ve been watching, there’s been no activity here. So get ready to be bored out of your mind.”

“I dunno, there are a bunch of skeletons in that room, that’s pretty exciting.”

“They get old fast, believe me.”

James isn’t sure he does, but he isn’t about to argue.

“On the bright side,” Marlene says, reaching into her back pocket and pulling out a pack of cards. “I brought Exploding Snap.”

James laughs, running a hand through his hair and trying to get himself to relax as Marlene starts shuffling. “You’re a genius you are.”

She grins up at him. “So I’ve been told.”

After about a dozen games and just as many losses James is pretty much at his wits end.

“Oh fuck me—these cards are rigged.”

Marlene is giggling so hard she actually has to place her hands on her stomach like she's getting a cramp. "I didn't realize you were so bad at this, I thought James Potter was good at everything."

"I AM good at everything!" James defends himself indignantly. "You're cheating."

"I am not."

"Are too!"

"Am not!"

"Are too!"

"Merlin," she's wiping tears of mirth from her eyes. "You're more of a baby than Gideon."

"I want a rematch," James demands.

"I'm not sure your ego can take it."

"My ego is just fine thank you very—"

It happens fast and simultaneous in slow motion. The windows break—actually, more accurately, are blown in—shards of glass shooting at them, both James and Marlene thrown back against the wall by the force of the explosion. Sharp pain shoots through James's spine and up the back of his head, the world around him shaking.

Somehow he manages to get his wand out, still trying to catch his breath when the first figure comes into sight.

"Expelliarmus!" James shouts, because it's the first thing that comes to mind. By some miracle it works, the man's wand flying off into the chaos. He growls, stepping forward, James only just getting to his feet. He's barely taken a step, mind frantically trying to come up with another spell, when he feels the Death Eater's fist collide with his face, sending him stumbling back into the wall.

His whole head feels like it's on fire at this point, but somehow he manages to dodge the second hit, scrambling out of the way as he whips his wand up.

"Incarcerous!"

Thick black ropes hit the man with such force that he's knocked to the ground, squirming and cursing as his legs and arms are bound tightly to his body. James doesn't even have time to breathe before the next dark robed figure steps into view.

"Crucio!"

James hurls himself out of the way, stumbling through the door into the back room. He runs right into something solid and warm, jumping back when he sees it's another fucking Death Eater.

Shit, he thinks, the man turning around with a leer. He has no idea where Marlene is, he can only imagine she's tied up with her own bad guy. Meaning they're outnumbered at least four to two if not more.

"Looking a little rough there pretty boy," the man says, and before James can react he reaches out and takes him by the throat. He's massive—maybe 6'3 or 6'5—and when he lifts James up his feet dangle off the ground. "Do you reckon your bones will be better?" he nods at the skeletons behind him. "Fresher and all that." He grins, pulling James away from the wall like he's getting ready to smash his head in.

Rictusempra.

James thinks desperately, hand gripping his wand. He can't speak. Doesn't have the air, the man's grip unbearably tight.

Rictusempra.

It's a stupid spell but it's the one his frazzled brain comes up with. Him and Sirius practiced casting it silently for ages in fourth year. They thought it was hilarious, making Peter spontaneously burst into giggles.

Rictusempra. Rictusempra. Rictusempra.

The man's body suddenly freezes, his hand on James's neck twitching as a choked noise comes out of his mouth, his eyes growing wide. James watches the man try to fight the spell, his limbs making strange abortive movements as choked giggles escape his mouth.

James starts wiggling, trying to get himself free, which results in the pair of them stumbling around the room both jerking awkwardly. Of course the more the man tries to fight the spell the more violent the waves of giggles get. James is swung around like a doll, knocking over furniture and slamming into walls. Eventually the man roars in frustration, though the noise descends into laughter half-way through and James feels himself being thrown across the room.

He isn't sure if it's done on purpose—he doesn't think so. But it's only as he tries to land, throwing his arms out for something to catch himself on, that James realizes the basement door is open. It's a moment later that he's falling down the stairs. The unbelievable pain of the hard wood steps overwhelming him, and for a moment he feels like he blacks out, crumpling into a heap when he finally hits the floor.

He knows he needs to get up. He does. Knows he doesn't have the luxury of staying on his knees like this. But he just—he needs a minute. Everything fucking hurts. He thinks he might have broken something. But he knows he has to get up. He's going to. Any minute now. He's going to get up. He's going to keep fighting. He has to keep fighting.

That's when he feels the hard tip of a wand press against the top of his head.

"I'd get up slowly if I were you."

His brain is all fucked. That's why he's so slow to react. Why it takes him a second. It's not that he doesn't hear that voice all the time, it's just that he's so used to it coming from inside his head.

"Reg?" he croaks, lifting his head to meet a pair of startled grey eyes.

It is.

It's him.

Right there.

Right. There.

Regulus stumbles backwards, looking at James like he's just seen a ghost—James can only imagine his own face is doing something similar. Regulus opens and closes his mouth but no sound comes out.

"Reg—"

He isn't sure exactly what he means to say. Something, presumably. But before the words make it out of his mouth the ceiling over their heads gives a mighty groan and then suddenly dust and concrete are crumbling down on them. James instantly throws himself backwards, stones grazing his shoulders, but he misses the worst of it, coughing as clouds of dust plume around the rubble. A sudden panic shoots through him as he stares at the wreckage in front of him.

"Reg?" he calls out, voice rough, fear skyrocketing when he doesn't hear an answer—not that he can hear much right now, his ears ringing.

"Regulus?" he starts desperately scrambling forward, throwing chunks of concrete out of the way as he picks through the room. "Regulus? Reg! Please, please, please," he cuts his hands on the stones as he throws them aside. "Regulus!" panic shakes his voice. "Regulus!"

"James!"

He looks up, heart hammering in his chest as he see Regulus crawling out from underneath a table a few feet in front of him. He almost cries, scrambling over the debris as Regulus moves towards him, the pair colliding in the centre of the room. He pulls Regulus into him without thinking, wrapping his arms around him.

"Fuck," he whispers. "Fuck you scared me."

He thinks Regulus says something but his words are mumbled and suddenly James realizes what he's done, instantly pulling back.

"Sorry," he says, this whole thing feeling a bit surreal. Regulus just stares back at him, uncomprehending. "I should have asked," James tries to explain with his barely functioning brain. "I should have asked before I touched you."

Something indecipherable flickers across Regulus's face before he's pulling James back to him, burying his head in James's chest.

"Hey," James says softly, hands skimming over Regulus's whole body, making sure he's okay, making sure he's real. "Hey." He drops his face into the other boy's hair, breathing in the smell of him and feeling something profound settle inside of him.

Hello again, his bones sing.

Where have you been?

Why did you leave?

Please don't go.

He isn't sure how long they stay like that. Seconds. Minutes. Hours. Too long though. They should have known better.

"What the fuck?"

James has barely turned around before he feels a spell hitting him square in the chest and sending him catapulting across the room. He isn't sure if it's the spell or the landing that hurts. He thinks it was only a repelling spell—still, knocked the fucking breath out of him. And he's lost his bloody wand.

Gasping for breath, the room spinning around him, he pushes himself up onto his hands and knees. He can hear fighting, see two blurry figures in front of him, but he feels like his head's been submerged underwater. He needs to get it together, he needs to find his wand, he needs to help Regulus.

Regulus.

His mind gets caught on his name for a moment. Holding it carefully. In awe.

Regulus. Regulus. Regulus.

He shakes his head to clear it—a mistake, because it hurts like a motherfucker—hands scrambling along the floor for his wand. It takes him far too long to realize that the reason he can't see isn't because he hit his head but because he's also lost his glasses.

"Fuck," he hisses under his breath. "Fuck, fuck, fuck." He tries to focus on the floor, grabbing at any vague looking lumps, but with the amount of debris covering this place that's not the most effective searching method.

He's really starting to panic now. Because he can't see, and he can't fight and he's not even sure he can really breathe and this is not a good time for any of those things to be happening. And where is Reg? Or Marlene? What if they need him? How is he supposed to do anything when he can't even fucking find his—

"James?"

He looks up as a blurry Regulus drops to his knees in front of him, there's something wrong with his voice but James doesn't know what it is or what it means.

"Are you okay?" Regulus asks.

"I can't find my glasses," is the first thing that comes out of his mouth, words clunky. He thinks Regulus nods but he can't be sure, and then he hears;

"Accio glasses," there's the noise of something whizzing through the air and then Regulus is delicately sliding a pair of scratched glasses onto his face. He doesn't pull away after, his hands sliding down to cradle James's cheeks, the world finally in focus.

"Are you okay?" he asks again.

"Yeah," James croaks. "You?"

Regulus gives him a tight smile. "All things considered, I could certainly be worse."

James laughs, coughing a little at the end. "Fuck I've missed you."

Regulus's expression twists, caught between happiness and pain. For a moment they just freeze again, caught up in one another, and James has the mad thought that Regulus is going to kiss him. And he's going to let him. But then Regulus pulls away.

James clears his throat. "What happened to..." but now that Regulus isn't so close he can see the rest of the room. Can see the body on the ground. "Oh shit."

"James," Regulus says seriously, bringing his attention back to him. "I need you to do something for me okay? I need you to tell your people that you killed Snyder. I need you to tell them that it was you."

James blinks, trying to make sense of all that, when something else catches his attention. "My wand—Reg, you have my wand."

He reaches out, and Regulus gives it up easily.

"James," he says again, this time sounding a little desperate. "I killed him with your wand okay? I had to, they'll check mine and I—You have to tell your side it was you."

That bit still isn't making sense to him. "But why would it matter what my side thinks? Shit Reg they should know—you fucking saved me."

But Regulus only shakes his head. "There's a spy," he says quickly, eyes darting around like he's worried just saying those words out loud will bring them out of the shadows. "Someone on your side has been turned and if they hear it was me it'll get back to the Dark Lord. They'll kill me James. On site. So you have to tell them it was you."

"Someone on our side has turned?" he demands, not believing it, not wanting to believe it. "Who?"

Regulus only shakes his head again. “I don’t know.”

“Reg—“

“Really I don’t, I’d tell you if I did,” he laughs at himself. “I’d tell you anything, you know that.”

James isn’t sure he does, but he reaches out anyway, hand wrapping around Regulus’s wrist, thumb brushing his pulse. “Come back with me,” he whispers.

Two years.

And here they are again.

“The Dark Mark is still on my arm James,” he says.

“You saved my life.”

He smiles sadly at him. “It doesn’t mean anything.”

James squeezes his wrist. “Come back with me.”

Where have you been?

Why did you leave?

Please don’t go.

Regulus opens his mouth to speak but before he can—

“Black!” someone shouts down, whether it’s from the top of the stairs or the hole in the ceiling James doesn’t know. “You good?”

“Yeah,” Regulus yells back, staring at James the whole time. “All clear down here. Lets go.”

Regulus frees his hand from James’s grip, sliding it up to the back of his neck and pulling him forward so he can kiss the top of his head. “Be safe,” he mumbles into James’s hair. “For me. Keep yourself safe.”

And then he’s gone. Back on his feet and running up the stairs before James can think to react.

James feels all kinds of not good. All kinds of lost and confused and hurt. His wand is still warm from where Regulus was holding it. Because Regulus was here. Right here, right in front of him. His eyes trail over to the body on the floor a few feet away. Regulus saved his life.

He hears footsteps upstairs, pulling himself further into the shadows as he watches figures pass overhead through the hole in the ceiling, the sound of the front door—or whatever’s left of it—banging open. He holds still and focuses on his breathing, not moving even when the

noise stops and the shop goes still. He counts to a hundred three times, fighting the urge to run up the stairs. He needs to be sure they're gone.

Eventually he gets to his feet, wand in his hand and raised as he steps over the dead body and the rubble. When he gets to the top floor he feels a new fear start to grow inside him—that any minute he'll round the corner and find Marlene lying there, dead.

"Lumos," he hisses, because the place is basically pitch black and the last thing he wants is to go falling through the floor back into the basement.

"Marlene?" he hisses, walking through the ruins. "Mar—"

"Oh thank Merlin!" James starts as Marlene bursts out of the shadows, throwing her arms around him and sending him a little off balance. "I thought you were dead," she mumbles into his shoulder. "They said you were dead and I—god, I'm so glad you're okay."

He wraps his arms around her, holding her tight.

"Same here," he says, surveying the damage over the top of her head. He sighs. "Moody's going to kill us."

Marlene lets out a wet scoff. "It was six on two, what the fuck were we supposed to do? Alice has been telling him for weeks we're spread too thin, that we need to prioritize instead of trying to cover every possible option."

James squeezes her again and then winces as a sharp pain shoots up the right side of his body. "Hey Mar?"

"Yeah?"

"I think I'm gonna have to go to St. Mungos."

She nods, pulling back, looking at him for the first time. "Jesus, yeah, your face looks like it was hit with a beater's club."

He laughs. "Thanks Mar."

She starts tugging him towards the street. "C'mon, will Apparate outside, contact the others from the hospital."

James nods, happy to be led, without any immediate danger he's really starting to feel the effects of being tossed around like a rag doll. He's unsteady on his feet and vaguely woozy, fairly certain he's only barely hanging onto his consciousness.

"Wait Mar," he slurs when they get out outside. "Before—I don't want to forget—there's a spy."

She looks at him, face wrinkled. "What?" she asks, swimming in front of him. James tries to hold onto to his train of thought.

“There’s a spy, someone on our side has been turned. We need to tell Dum—“ and suddenly, in his half-conscious state, something clicks. “He knows,” James hisses nonsensically, black dots starting to take up a good portion of his vision.

“What? Who knows? What are you talking about?”

But he can see it so clearly, the way Dumbledore had looked that night in his office, the way he had treated them. He already knows there’s a spy. And he thinks it’s Sirius.

That’s the last thought James has before the world goes dark.

Chapter End Notes

Hello beautiful people!

I have lost track of days so I don't know how late this chapter is but I feel like it is pretty late so I apologize!

Also, unrelated, but you know that part in "my tears ricochet" where T. Swift is all "And I can go anywhere I want, anywhere I want just not home" ? That's what I hear in my head every time I read the bit where James and Regulus run together and hug. Cause they're each others homes (sobs for eternity) and also I am a giant sap.

ANYWAY! Thank you for being here and being your wonderful selves, hope you have a great day!

Chapter 44

Chapter Summary

This one's going to hurt.

Chapter Notes

TW: Referenced Sexual Assault / Threatened Sexual Assault (There's a moment in this chapter where it feels like things are going to escalate, I want to reassure you that they don't but also warn you that it feels that way because I know that even that is a little intense and triggering so be careful, it's in Part III)

TW: Death (This one hurts, it's at the end, so again, y'know, take care of yourselves)

ALSO I just want to throw this out there before you yell at the screen / me (hi!) this fic is canon compliant but it's also an interpretation of canon so sometimes I mess around with things, specifically in the coming chapters I play around with the order in which things happen a little bit

****FRENCH TRANSLATIONS IN THE END NOTES****

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

PART I SIRIUS

He's on his way out. James is on duty with Marlene and his flat is empty and terrible and he doesn't even care if he does something stupid because, quite frankly, Remus can go fuck himself. He has his coat on, keys and money jingling in his pockets, wand slipped up his sleeve, ready to go, when he hears the sound of footsteps on the stairs. Sirius freezes, staring at the door. He listens to the sound of the lock clicking, watches as the door handle turns. He tells himself he has no idea who's on the other side, that he should get his wand out, get ready for a fight. Because it could be anyone. But he doesn't.

Remus stops halfway across the threshold looking, Sirius thinks, unreasonably shocked to see him considering he lives here. If anyone should be looking shocked it's Sirius.

"You gonna close the door?" he asks eventually, voice flat.

"Oh," Remus sounds rough, like he's been shouting. Actually, he looks pretty rough all round—bruised and scraped and dirty. He closes the door but doesn't move any closer. Sirius

doesn't think he's ever heard their home sound so quiet.

"Sirius?" Remus says finally, his voice wavering. Sirius has to close his eyes for a minute because he's so fucking angry, beyond angry, there isn't even a word for what he is. But it's obvious that Remus is in no shape to hash this out right now, so he has to just...find a place to put it.

"Take your clothes off," he says as he chucks his own jacket onto the sofa. "I'll start the shower."

"I—"

But Sirius is already walking down the hall. He's worried if he has to talk about this right now he won't be able to keep it together. Won't be able to hold back.

He's testing the water temperature when he hears Remus shuffle in behind him. Sirius probably focuses a little harder on the water than is strictly necessary, listening to the sound of Remus carefully folding his clothes and placing them on top of the toilet. Eventually Sirius forces himself to turn around.

It's work for him not to react to the state that Remus is in. He's seen him in rough shape before but this—his body is covered in bruises and welts, like someone's been beating him. Without even thinking Sirius feels himself reaching out but Remus shies away, looking down like he's ashamed. Sirius's hand freezes mid-air and then drops.

"You hungry?" he asks eventually, swallowing around the lump in his throat. "Shower, I'll make something."

"You don't have to," Remus says, eyes still on the tile floor.

"Okay. That mean you don't want any?"

He watches Remus scrunch up his swollen face and he wonders what the hell he's thinking. And where the hell he's been and how the hell he could walk away so fucking easily—but no. No. That train of thought isn't helpful right now.

"If you're making something anyway then—yeah, yeah I'd like some. Please," his speech is stilted. Stiff.

"Okay," Sirius says again. "Water's warm."

"Thank you."

"Sure." Sirius steps around him, heading for the door.

"Sirius—"

"Not now," is all he says, not bothering to stop on his way to the kitchen. He grabs hold of the counter when he gets there, pressing his palms to the cold surface and dropping his head. His breath shakes as he inhales. He has no idea what he's doing. Isn't sure who he's more

angry with; Remus or Dumbledore. And those injuries...if he ever finds out who put those fucking marks on Remus he's going to—

A loud thud comes from the bathroom and Sirius is running before he even has time to think, throwing the door open to find Remus on his hands and knees in the shower. He looks up at the sound of Sirius entering, face twisted in pain.

“Sorry,” he half sobs. “I’m sorry, I don’t—I slipped,” he grimaces as he tries to get back on his feet but doesn’t quite manage it. He’s too weak—that thought makes something in Sirius’s chest ache, like his heart is a bruise.

Quickly he pulls off his boots and socks. “Stop—just—wait,” he snaps at Remus when he starts trying to get up again. He doesn’t bother with the rest of his clothes, jumping into the tub before Remus can hurt himself.

“What’re you trying to crack your fucking skull open?” Sirius mutters, arms under Remus’s as he lifts him carefully to his feet.

“I’m sorry,” Remus says again.

“Stop it,” because he knows Remus isn’t apologizing about falling, or if he is, it’s not all he’s apologizing for, and Sirius needs him to cut it out.

Remus leans into him, giving Sirius most of his weight, forehead resting against his shoulder. Water runs down his back, turning red as it washes off dried blood and Sirius has to look away before he starts screaming or crying or doing something else embarrassing and unhinged.

“You should have told me it was this bad, I would have just come in with you in the first place,” he mutters, running his hands softly up and down Remus’s sides.

“I thought it would be okay,” Remus mumbles, not lifting his head. Sirius sighs, neither of them has ever been very good at asking for help.

“Put your arms around my neck,” he says eventually, there’s a second of hesitation before Remus does as he’s asked. “Hold on, tell me if you need to sit down okay?”

Remus nods, hair tickling Sirius’s face. He moves them slightly further under the streaming water, reaching for the soap and being as careful as possible when he cleans the filth off of Remus’s body. Remus hisses a few times but insists he doesn’t want to stop.

“Tilt your head back,” Sirius says softly, watching Remus’s eyelids flutter closed as he works shampoo into his mop of blonde hair. After it’s all rinsed out Sirius can’t stop himself from kissing Remus’s temple, which drags something like a sob from Remus who still has his eyes closed.

“Sh, sh,” Sirius says softly. “You’re okay.”

It’s a bit awkward getting out. Sirius dries Remus off, tying the towel around his waist before he quickly strips out of his sopping wet clothes, throwing them over the tub and grabbing his

own towel.

“C’mon,” Sirius says, snaking his arm around Remus’s waist.

“I can walk,” the other boy mutters.

“You can’t even stand mate.”

Remus frowns but doesn’t fight him, letting Sirius guide him to the bedroom and sit him on the edge of the bed. He gets himself dressed first—joggers, an old t-shirt—before he pulls out the pair of flannel pyjamas he knows Remus likes best. He starts to try and tug the shirt over Remus’s head but his boyfriend has apparently reached his limit.

“Oh Merlin—I can dress myself,” he says, exasperated as he yanks the shirt out of Sirius’s hands.

“Suit yourself,” Sirius says flatly. “Lie down, I’ll make soup,” he doesn’t wait for Remus’s reply before he heads to the kitchen for the second time. He pulls a can of chicken noodle from the cupboard and turns the stove on. It’s already started steaming by the time Remus wanders into the kitchen.

Sirius arches his brow. “The fuck do you think you’re doing?” he points the wooden spoon he’s been using to stir accusingly in Remus’s direction.

The other boy rolls his eyes before sitting down on the couch.

“Remus—“

“I just want to be able to see you okay? I just need to—“ his voice breaks and he shakes his head, clearly irritated with himself. Sirius presses down on his sternum, trying to cut off whatever the hell that feeling is that Remus has just dragged out of him. He turns back to the soup.

“Fine.”

They don’t speak again until Sirius walks over to the couch with two full bowls. Remus cradles his in his hands for a few seconds, not moving.

“Thank you,” he says eventually.

Sirius only grunts.

They eat in silence, Remus clearly struggling to go slowly and Sirius doing his best not to think about the fact that his boyfriend has returned beaten and starved. Tries his best not to plot Dumbledore’s death. Not to start breaking things.

Eventually Remus places his bowl down on the table and Sirius takes it over to the sink, which is really a sign of the end times because he’s rubbish at remembering to wash the dishes. He turns on the tap, makes sure the water’s as hot as it can possibly go and starts scrubbing. He hears Remus coming up behind him. Tries to ignore him. Fails.

“You should sit down,” he says finally, still scrubbing. These are gonna be the cleanest fucking bowls in the whole flat.

“I’m feeling better.”

“Won’t last if you don’t sit your ass back down.”

“Sirius.”

He grits his teeth, pointedly not responding to that. To the way his name comes out of Remus’s mouth like a plea for mercy. When the silence stretches on he hears Remus sigh.

“Will you look at me? Please?”

Sirius slams off the tap, placing his hands on the counter, trying to prepare himself for what’s coming. Trying to make promises to himself—that he won’t lose control. That he’ll just talk. He can do this. He can be reasonable. He can feel things...normally. He swallows before turning around, leaning against the counter and crossing his arms, staring flatly at Remus. He wants desperately to reach out to him. He doesn’t.

Remus’s eyes search him, looking for something, Sirius doesn’t know what, doesn’t know if he finds it. “Dumbledore told me I couldn’t tell anyone.”

“Since when does Dumbledore get to decide what happens here,” Sirius asks, gesturing between them.

“But we don’t just exist here do we?” Remus sounds tired. “We’re in the Order. We have to follow orders.”

Sirius scoffs, looking away as he shakes his head. “You disappeared for a week. A fucking week. I didn’t know what happened, I didn’t even know you’d gone on a mission, I thought —“ his voice cracks, refusing to go on.

“I know,” Remus sounds so small. “I know. I’m sorry. I swear I tried to—but he made me promise Sirius and I—we have to trust him. What are we doing if we don’t trust him?”

Sirius doesn’t answer. Doesn’t have one. Just keeps staring at the wall, fingers picking themselves apart. “Where were you then?” he asks finally.

The pause afterwards goes on long enough that Sirius looks back at Remus.

“I can’t tell you,” he says eventually.

For a moment Sirius does nothing. And then, he laughs. “Are you fucking kidding me?”

“I’m sorry,” he holds his hands out but doesn’t try to close the space between them. He knows better than that. “I swear Sirius, I don’t like this anymore than you do. I hate it. I hated leaving. I hated knowing that you would—that it would hurt you,” his voice breaks. “I don’t know what you want me to do.”

“Tell me where you were!” Sirius shouts. “Tell me where the fuck you were Remus? Tell me what happened, what did this to you?”

But he only stares back at him helplessly and Sirius feels old wounds opening up inside him.

“You don’t trust me.”

“I DO, of course I do.”

It’s his own fault. He knows it is. He fucking knows. But he still hates it. “Not more than Dumbledore though,” he says eventually, watching Remus flinch. “That’s it isn’t it?”

The other boy sighs, running a hand through his hair. He looks pale, too pale, scars and cuts standing out starkly against his sickly complexion, the skin beneath his eyes a deep purple.

“We have to trust him,” Remus says finally, repeating himself. “If we don’t we’ll fall apart,” he sounds like he’s trying to reason with himself as much as Sirius.

Sirius wants to rage and scream and break things. But Remus is teetering. “You need to lie down,” he snaps eventually. “Go to bed Remus.”

But predictably, Remus doesn’t give a fuck what Sirius thinks. “I don’t need to lie down.”

Sirius almost laughs for real. “You’re paler than the fucking Bloody Baron. I’m not going to have you pass out on me mid-fight.”

But Remus’s mouth has formed a stubborn line and he shakes his head. “I don’t need to lie down.”

“Remus—“

“I need YOU,” he says forcibly, cutting Sirius off at the knees. “So we’re just going to—to do this now. You’re going to yell and I’m going to apologize and tell you I love you over and over again until you believe me. Until you forgive me. Okay?” His voice wavers but his gaze is steady, refusing to let Sirius go. It’s unfair really. All of this.

“What if I can’t,” he says finally.

Remus blinks. “Can’t what?”

“Forgive you.”

“What?” the word shakes. “What?” Remus repeats. “You—no, you—Sirius please, this isn’t—please,” he’s breathing too fast, trembling all over, making himself sick.

Sirius went too far. He always goes too far.

“You have to forgive me,” Remus rambles on, eyes so wide they take up half his face.

“Moons—“

“I know it was awful, I do Sirius, I swear it was a-awful for me too. I didn’t want to leave you, I’m just trying to do the right thing here. I’m trying to help. To prove that I can.”

“Okay Remus, it’s okay,” it isn’t but he doesn’t want to watch him take himself apart anymore. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have—I forgive you, of course I forgive you.” It isn’t true, he hates that it isn’t true, but it isn’t. Sirius has never been particularly good at letting things go. He knows he will, eventually, he will forgive Remus, and that’s all that matters. It’ll be true one day.

Sirius pulls Remus into him, wrapping his arms around him and holding him tight. He feels him shaking under his arms—crying, Sirius realizes.

“Oh Remus,” he says softly.

Remus snuffles. “Sorry I don’t—I’m just tired. Fuck this is so embarrassing, I don’t know why I’m acting like this.”

Where were you?

Sirius swallows the question.

What did they do to you?

Where can I find them?

“You’re alright Rem,” he says instead. “You’re all good.” He rubs his hand up and down Remus’s back.

“You’re so—so important to me,” Remus mumbles, face buried in Sirius’s neck, a position that requires Remus to be slightly hunched over.

Sirius closes his eyes, feeling a little closer to tears than he would like. He presses their cheeks together, Remus’s skin burning hot the way it always does.

“C’mon,” he says after a few seconds. “Bed, lets go.”

This time Remus doesn’t fight him, though he doesn’t pull away much either, still attempting to curl himself into Sirius as they walk down the hall. When they slide under the covers they end up on their sides, facing one another. The room is dark, but Sirius can still make out Remus’s eyes in the moonlight. He reaches out, thumb brushing against Remus’s jaw. He watches the other boy’s eyelids grow heavy, drooping low, though he fights them. Like he doesn’t want to stop looking at Sirius.

“Go to sleep,” Sirius whispers eventually, wondering if Remus is waiting for permission. Remus holds his eyes a moment longer before turning his face into Sirius’s hand, first kissing his palm, then the pad of each finger, each knuckle.

“I’m sorry,” he says in between. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry.”

“Sh,” Sirius soothes, his voice shaking. “Okay, it’s okay Remus,” and he really wishes it was. “Go to sleep now.”

Remus nods, shuffling closer so that they slide together, fitting into one another like puzzle pieces. Sirius rests his chin on the top of Remus’s head, hands stroking up and down his back, well aware that he’s still tense as all hell.

When Sirius starts singing he’s barely even thinking about it; “À la claire fontaine m'en allant promener, J'ai trouvé l'eau si belle que je m'y suis baignée. Il y a longtemps que je t'aime, jamais je ne t'oublierai.”

Remus hums, burrowing further into Sirius’s chest, which he takes as a good sign.

“Sous les feuilles d'un chêne, je me suis fait sécher. Sur la plus haute branche, un rossignol chantait. Il y a longtemps que je t'aime, jamais je ne t'oublierai. Chante, rossignol, chante, toi qui as le cœur gai. Tu as le cœur à rire... moi je l'ai à pleurer. Il y a longtemps que je t'aime, jamais je ne t'oublierai.”

Remus has settled, his breathing evening out, and Sirius is almost certain he’s asleep when a soft voice breaks the silence. “Where did you learn that?”

Sirius thinks about lying but decides against it. “My dad, used to sing it to me and Reg when we were little. When we couldn’t get to sleep.”

“Hmm,” Remus hums, the noise rumbling against Sirius’s ribs. Time passes and again he thinks Remus has gone to sleep when; “You never speak french.”

Sirius feels himself go stiff, knows Remus must feel it too. “Reminds me too much of...them I guess. Don’t like the way it makes my voice sound.”

“Your voice sounds beautiful,” Remus scoffs, words slightly slurred by sleep. “Your voice always sounds beautiful.”

Sirius laughs into his hair. “If you say so.”

“I do.”

“Okay. Goodnight Moony.”

“G’night.”

And this time they really do fall asleep.

It’s the light Sirius notices first—vaguely blue, invading his sleep. He groans, rolling over, burying his face in his pillow. That’s when he hears the voice.

“—and besides, I might need help bullying my way into the hospital room, not being family and all that. Okay. Okay. I have to go.”

The talking stops and Sirius sits up in bed. It's still pitch black outside, the clock on the bedside table screaming four AM at him. He feels disoriented. At first he thinks it's James's Patronus staring at him but after a few seconds of squinting his brain finally wakes up enough to realize it's missing its antlers.

"Is Lily here?" Remus mumbles, pressing his face into Sirius's thigh. Sirius only grunts in response, waiting for the message to play again. He hasn't dispersed the Patronus so it should —

"Sirius!" Lily's voice fills the room. "Sirius it's James, he's hurt, he's—" she sounds out of breath, flustered, like she's running. "The shop him and Marlene were guarding tonight was attacked. I'm on my way to St Mungo's now, they didn't tell me anything I—I think he's okay but if, if you can. If you're home. He'll want you there. And besides, I might need help bullying my way into the hospital room, not being family and all that. Okay. Okay. I have to go."

Remus sits up now, hair standing on end, rubbing at his face.

"Fuck," Sirius hisses, everything taking too long to sink in, his brain still sleep slow. "Fuck, fuck, fuck."

He rolls out of bed, scrambling around on the floor for a pair of jeans. He's only just pulling them on when he sees Remus slowly standing up, swaying the minute he's on his feet.

"Lie down," he says, which just earns him a scoff. "Remus, we have enough medical emergencies to deal with at the moment get the fuck back in bed."

"Sirius!" the Patronus starts again. "Sirius it's James, he's hurt, he's—"

"Oh fucking hell," Sirius mutters over Lily's voice, grabbing for his wand and vanishing the doe into a white mist.

Remus bends down to pick something up and winces, hand going to his lower back. Sirius is at his side in seconds.

"Will. You. Stop. Hurting. Yourself." He growls as he helps Remus lower himself onto the mattress. Remus instantly looks away, down at the floor.

"It's not that bad," he mutters under his breath.

God Sirius wants to scream at him.

Wants to kiss him.

"Not bad for you is practically dead for the rest of us," Sirius says, and when Remus continues to scowl at the floor; "Humour me, please?"

He runs his hand through Remus's hair and the other boy's eyes flutter closed.

“Okay,” Remus sighs, and he really must be hurt if he’s giving in this easily. “But you’ll send word, as soon as you know what’s happening?”

“Absolutely,” Sirius says, giving Remus’s hair a light tug before he moves towards the door. He doesn’t quite make it out of the room though, something scraping at the inside of his skin. He looks back at Remus, not fully knowing what he wants to say.

“Hey,” Remus’s brow creases with concern. “I’ll be here when you get back, you know that right?”

It takes a great deal of effort for Sirius not to wince. Because of course, that’s it. That’s the problem. The last time he walked out the door and left Remus behind Remus wasn’t there when he got back.

“Sirius?” Remus says, looking like he’s about to get out of bed again. “I’m going to be here,” he enunciates each word.

Sirius swallows, forcing himself to react. “Yeah, I know,” he says, but he’s not sure that’s true anymore. “I’ll see you soon I—“ he stumbles over his words. “I love you.”

The concern on Remus’s face doesn’t lessen. “Sirius—“

But he doesn’t stick around, already bolting out of the flat.

Sirius hates hospitals. He doesn’t have a reason for it. It’s not because he came and sat at the bed of someone he loved and watched them get sick. Or die. Hospitals are just too...bright. Too clean. Filled with people in various uniforms who want to know who he thinks he is and where he thinks he’s going. There are too many doors in hospitals and not enough windows. And they always smell like disinfectant. He hates it. Hates it even more now that he’s here for his best mate.

“James Potter,” he says breathlessly to the witch behind the desk, she looks up at him over the top of her paperwork.

“Excuse me?”

“I’m here for James Potter, where is he?”

She glares at him but she’s no Walburga so he doesn’t even blink. He’s feeling antsy, feeling all kinds of twisted up and angry and scared. Remus being away was hard. Remus being back is almost harder. And now this. He just needs to see James, to touch him, to hear him laugh. To know that he’s whole and there and okay.

“Are you family?” the woman asks.

“Yes.”

Her eyes run him up and down. “ID?”

“Don’t have any. Promise you, he’s my family. Now tell me where I can find him.”

The woman’s expression hardens. “No. Only family is allowed—“

“Sirius!”

He looks past the desk to see a frazzled redhead in purple pyjama bottoms and a Gryffindor sweatshirt walking towards him. Sirius start moving without sparing another glance for the woman behind the desk who he can hear calling after him. Lily practically launches herself into his arms and he gathers her up, squeezing tight.

“I’m so glad you’re here,” she says into his shoulder.

“Me too. Have you seen him?” he asks as he places her back on her feet.

She nods, “Yeah, yeah, him and Mar—they’re okay. I mean,” she keeps talking while she starts dragging him down the hall. “He has some fractured ribs, broken nose, concussion, bad bruising,” her voice cracks and she shakes her head. “Thank God he’s a wizard, they say he’ll be able to go home in a few hours. I can’t even imagine if we didn’t have magic...” she trails off. Sirius is only partially able to follow her train of thought but he doesn’t make her explain. He just wants to see James. Just wants to make sure he’s alright.

“Hey look Potter,” Marlene says when they walk into a small room with black and white tiles on the floor and yellowing paint on the walls. “It’s your husband.”

Marlene is bruised, with a nasty gash under her left eye, but she doesn’t seem to have anything more serious than that, sitting comfortably on the chair across from James’s bed. James looks much worse, Sirius’s breath catching in his chest when he sees him.

“Fuck,” he hisses, staring at his friend’s swollen face.

“Don’t worry,” James says lightly. “I’ll be beautiful again soon enough and you can go back to being the ugly marauder.”

Sirius forces himself to move forward, practically jogging to James’s side, hand landing on his shoulder. “You’re a dick,” he mutters.

James grins—well, tries to—his mouth is clearly still sore and doesn’t seem to have the will to pull all the way up.

“You okay?” Sirius asks, eyes intently on James’s.

His best mate nods. “Yeah Pads, yeah I’m okay.”

Sirius looks up at Marlene. “And you McKinnon?”

From her he gets a real smile. “Fucking peachy.” That actually makes him laugh.

“Okay,” Sirius says, as much to himself as to everyone else. “Okay,” he lets out a breath he wasn’t aware he’d been holding. James is okay. Marlene is okay. Remus is...home, at least.

He can do this. He can handle this.

“Oi,” James elbows him in the stomach. “Stop it. I’m fine.”

“I know,” Sirius says, squeezing his shoulder, trying to ignore the fact that two of the most important people in his life have turned up beaten to a pulp tonight and he wasn’t there. Not for either of them. Couldn’t stop it. Couldn’t help.

“Okay that’s it, Lily, I’m too weak to smack any sense into him, will you come over here and do it for me?” James whines.

Lily only rolls her eyes from the other side of his bed. “Not that I’m one to turn down the opportunity to smack Sirius Black—“

“Kinky Evans.”

“—but I think you could cut him some slack right now.”

James lets out a put upon sigh. “You’ve gone soft. Remember when you used to be cut throat?”

Marlene snorts. “Oh yeah, good old cut throat Lily. Walking around terrorizing first years and stepping on her friends to get to the top.”

Lily looks over at her, arching her brow. “What exactly was the top?”

“Dating me, obviously,” James bats his bruised eyes at her.

“I was gonna say being Head Girl,” Marlene snorts. “But I suppose that works.”

“Merlin, I can’t believe I felt sorry for either of you,” Lily doesn’t manage to keep the fondness out of her voice.

Sirius is still holding onto James, hasn’t let go the whole time. He suddenly wishes that Remus had come with him, that he could keep hands on both of them, never letting them out of arms reach.

“You let Peter know?” He asks Lily eventually.

She nods. “Sent him a Patronus, just like you.”

James turns to him, and Sirius notices for the first time that his glasses are cracked. “What do you wanna bet he slept through it?”

Sirius rolls his eyes. “What do you wanna bet he called it mum and told it to give him five more minutes?”

James snickers and then winces, eyes squeezing shut. Sirius feels all the mirth drain out of him.

“Are you okay? Prongs? Someone get the Healer—”

“I’m fine Padfoot,” James mumbles, eyes still closed, a wane smile pulling up the side of his mouth. “It’s the concussion, they gave me a potion for it but it hasn’t...completely...fixed it yet,” he exhales like it’s difficult to talk. “Comes and goes.”

Sirius sees Lily reach out and take James’s hand and he has the absurd desire to push her away. To never let anyone touch him ever again. He knows that James doesn’t belong to him. He does. It’s just that sometimes something in his chest forgets.

“Sorry,” James says, face still tense. “I’ll be better in a minute.”

“What the fuck are you apologizing for?” Sirius demands, pulling another weak smile out of James.

“I’m being a terrible host.”

Lily laughs at that, quiet and choked, and when Sirius looks over he can see his own worry and fear reflected in her eyes. They’d all fall apart without James, Sirius is almost certain. He’s the one who keeps them together, the one who holds them up. Without him the rest of them are dust.

Lily looks like she’s about to say something when the door to the room flies open and Dorcas comes charging through.

“Mar,” she says weakly, barely giving Marlene enough time to stand before she’s throwing her arms around her. “Oh thank Merlin.”

“Hey,” Marlene says softly, hugging her girlfriend back. “I told you I was okay.”

“You told me you’d been attacked!”

“AND that I was okay,” Marlene says, words partially smothered as Dorcas somehow manages to squeeze them closer.

“And that you were in the hospital!” Dorcas insists.

“Oh, well, that’s mostly for James. He’s more delicate than me.”

“Oi!” James protests weakly from the bed.

Dorcas pulls back, hands going to cradle Marlene’s face, a small whimper leaving her mouth. “They hurt you,” she nearly whispers, thumb brushing softly over the bruises on Marlene’s face.

Marlene looks back at her with soft eyes. “I really am okay.”

Something pinches in Sirius’s chest and he has to look away. There’s some part of him that feels like this is what it should have been like when Remus came home. Sirius should have rushed forward, should have taken him in his arms and told him how fucking worried he’d

been. How happy he was that Remus was back. That he was alive. But then, Marlene hadn't disappeared for a week without a word. Hadn't turned back up and refused to say where she'd been or what she'd been doing.

"We're going to head home," Marlene's voice pulls Sirius out of his thoughts. She's looking at James even though he still has his eyes closed. "You going to be okay with these two?"

"Yeah," James says. "I think I'll manage. It was fun working with you Mar, lets do it again soon yeah?"

Marlene laughs, walking forward and pressing a kiss to his forehead. "Feel better prick," she whispers, before returning to Dorcas's side. They wave to Lily and Sirius on their way out, Marlene leaning heavily into Dorcas.

Lily slumps against the wall as the door closes, still holding James's hand. If he feels smothered by the two of them James doesn't say anything. Maybe understanding their need to be close to him right now, to feel the proof that he's okay beneath their hands.

"So," James says into the new silence, exaggerated cheerfulness in his voice. "How've you two been? Get up to anything exciting tonight?"

Lily snorts, but Sirius can't quite manage to shake the question off. Rubbing his face with his free hand; "Remus came home."

Lily instantly stands up straight again, James's eyes snapping open causing him to wince.

"Ow—What?" he demands.

"Is he alright?" Lily asks at the same time. "Where was he?"

Sirius lets out a bitter laugh. "Won't tell me."

There's a beat of silence and then James repeats; "What?"

Sirius shrugs, finding, suddenly, that he doesn't want to talk about this. "He's beat up pretty bad, looks like he was..." he trails off, trying to keep control of the feeling lashing out in his chest. "Like he was hit with a belt or...I don't know," he shakes his head, looking away.

"Fuck," James says under his breath. "Merlin, where the hell was he?"

Sirius offers up another shrug because, isn't that the million galleon question. He wonders, bitterly, if Remus would tell James. He might. "He wanted to come," he says before his thoughts can spiral too far down. "I wouldn't let him, didn't want him hurting himself. But, you should know that he wanted to be here."

He isn't sure what about that statement causes the silence that follows. If it's his voice or his face, he still isn't looking at either of them. Eventually James breaks the tension.

"Psst, Evans," he mock whispers. "Can you give Sirius a hug for me? I'm a little restrained at the moment."

“God you’re such a dork.”

Sirius rolls his eyes. “I don’t need a hug Prongs.”

“Mm, I beg to differ. Plus, Lily gives excellent hugs.”

“Obviously I know that,” he says, smiling despite himself as Lily steps around the bed. “Me and your girlfriend have embraced on several occasions.”

“Okay well you didn’t have to put it like that...”

“Aw babe, don’t be jealous,” Lily says teasingly.

“I’m not jealous,” James overemphasizes the last word. “I know you’d never leave me for him.”

“Oh no, I totally would.”

Sirius lets out a bark of laughter.

“Alas,” she sighs dramatically, ignoring James’s outraged face. “He’s taken. But a girl can dream.” She bats her big green eyes at him.

“C’mere here Evans,” Sirius opens his arms and Lily goes to him quickly, her hold warm and strong and comforting. He actually does feel a little better.

“We’re still here,” she whispers into his shoulder, up on her tiptoes to reach. “After everything we’re still here, still muddling through, that has to mean something doesn’t it?”

Sirius squeezes her back. “Yeah,” he croaks, though he isn’t entirely sure he believes it.

By the time Sirius gets back to the flat it’s nearly nine in the morning. He doesn’t hear anyone in the kitchen or find Remus lounging on the couch with a book as is his habit, and for one sharp, painful moment he’s afraid he made it all up. That he’d dreamed it and that Remus actually didn’t come back at all.

Of course the evidence of their dinner still sits in the drying rack and Sirius’s wet clothes are still hanging in the bathroom. But it isn’t until he’s standing in the doorway of their bedroom, until he sees Remus lying in their bed, wrapped in blankets, hair splayed out over the pillow, that he really starts breathing again. The knot in his stomach slowly undoing itself. Replaced by something else. A wave of emotion so intense he can hardly stand it.

Sirius escapes to the bathroom, shutting the door behind him and sitting down on the edge of the tub, head dropping between his knees as he tries to breathe. It’s too much. Losing Remus. Having him. Knowing he could lose him again. Knowing he almost lost James. It’s like they’re all standing in the middle of a frozen lake, wondering who the ice will crack under next. Sirius’s fingers dig into his skull. He just loves them so much. It’s awful. It hurts.

There's a soft knock on the door but Sirius doesn't bother answering, probably couldn't even if he wanted to. He hears the sound of it opening, hears the hitch in Remus's breath when he finds him.

"Oh Sirius," he says softly, and in the next moment Remus is kneeling on the floor in front of him, hands on either side of Sirius's face, lifting it up. "James?" he asks, looking into Sirius's red eyes.

"Fine," he chokes out. "He'll be fine."

Remus nods, looking at Sirius for a moment longer before he starts pulling him down into his lap. It's awkward and clumsy but Sirius goes willingly.

"You're hurt."

Remus only scoffs. "You hold me during my break down, I hold you during your's, that's how we get through this."

Sirius laughs wetly into his shoulder, as Remus leans back against the wall.

"Is that what we're doing? Getting through it? Because I just feel like I'm standing still Remus. Standing still and watching everyone I love bleed."

"Don't," Remus holds him more tightly. "You're just as much a part of this as the rest of us."

"I'm a Black," he snuffles bitterly. "I'll always be on the outside. People will always wonder about me."

"Those people are idiots," Remus says vehemently. "You aren't your name Sirius, you aren't your family. You've been proving that since you were eleven years old. Probably before, just none of us were there to see it."

And he knows he should leave it. It's been a long enough night. Long enough day. But he can't help it.

"Then why won't you tell me where you were?" he whispers.

He feels Remus tense around him. "Sirius..."

"Where did you go Remus? What did you do? Who fucking hurt you?"

"I want to tell you," Remus whispers back. "I swear I do."

"Then why don't you?"

There's a long pause, Remus buries his face in Sirius's hair, squeezing him so tightly it feels like he's trying to force Sirius between his ribs. Like he would share his skin with him if he could.

“Dumbledore—“ Remus finally starts in a choked voice. “He—I promised Sirius, I gave him my word.”

Sirius takes another minute to enjoy the warmth of Remus’s arms before he pulls away, getting to his feet.

“Sirius—“ Remus says desperately, still on the bathroom floor. Sirius’s eyes flick down to him and then away.

“I’m going to bed,” he says finally, voice rusted through. Maybe sleeping will help. Maybe he’ll hate this less in the morning. Hate Remus less for this. For choosing the Order over him. He knows it’s a childish thing to want—to be the most important thing—no doubt a leftover from his childhood. But knowing what’s fucked him up never seems to fix the way he feels.

“Okay,” he hears Remus say uncertainly. “Do you want me to—do you want me to come with you or...” he never would have asked before and Sirius feels himself wince, knowing this is his fault, if he could just let it go... but he can feel old walls building up inside him.

“Do what you want Remus,” he says flatly, not about to ask for someone who might walk away at any moment. Not about to ask for someone who isn’t always there. Sirius has been left before. He knows there’s no point in begging people to stay.

PART II JAMES

It’s a few days after the incident that James finds himself in Moody’s office with Marlene, Alice, Frank and Dumbledore. They’re discussing what happened—a debrief, Moody called it. Trying to figure out what Marlene and James could have done differently, which he thinks they both bristle at. He’s not sure there was anyway they were going to successfully defend themselves against six opponents, but Moody disagrees.

He wants to start putting Order members through training, wants them to learn defensive tactics, which is all well and good, Alice says, but they also need to conserve their forces. They’re spread too thin, working themselves ragged. They need to be more strategic. Alice is about the only person willing to talk to Moody like that, I mean, Dumbledore might but he doesn’t, at least not in front of the rest of them. Mostly he just sits back and observes.

In any case, eventually they decide to drop three locations from the guard rotations. Less than Alice wants and more than Moody wants. Frank’s idea. And then there’s the issue of the spy.

“I can’t believe you didn’t tell us,” Alice says indignantly, staring down Moody and Dumbledore like they aren’t two of the most powerful Wizards alive. “You’ve known for weeks and you didn’t think to mention it?!”

“We didn’t know,” Dumbledore responds calmly before Moody can bark back. “We suspected. Now, with this new information,” he nods his head in James’s direction. “Our suspicions are confirmed.”

“How’d you find this out again?” Frank asks, turning to James who fidgets in his chair.

“Er—heard two of them talking about it.”

Thankfully, no one questions his story much.

“So what’re we going to do?” Marlene asks, leaning forward in her seat. “How are we gonna catch him?”

“You lot,” Moody grumbles, “aren’t going to do anything. Me and Albus will handle this.”

Alice arches an impressive eyebrow. “How?”

“None of your business.”

“How can you say that?! Of course it’s our business! We’re as much a part of this as—“

“Alice,” Dumbledore doesn’t yell, doesn’t even sound angry, but there’s something about him that is undeniable. A single word and they all snap their attention right to him. Alice silenced.

“I understand your frustration,” he goes on steadily. “But this is a delicate situation, and the longer that the other side remains ignorant of our knowledge on this matter the more likely it is that we will be able to catch the individual in question. So, for the time being, you need to trust that me and Alastor have this in hand.”

Alice looks distinctly unhappy about this, chewing on her lower lip as she holds Dumbledore’s gaze. James reckons there’s a fifty percent chance she starts cursing them out again. Alice is fearless like that. After a few more seconds Frank steps forward, squeezing her arm. It’s clear that gesture communicates something the rest of them can’t hear because Alice seems to deflate slightly.

“Fine,” she says. “But we’re telling the people we trust.”

“People you trust?” Moody barks. “Have I taught you nothing? You can trust no one.”

“Then what do you call this,” she throws her arms out, gesturing to the room. “Clearly you can trust some people. And if there is a threat this close to us I want the people I care about to know, to be able to protect themselves.”

“I’ve already told Lily,” James interjects, before the argument can continue. “And I’m telling Sirius,” he looks specifically at Dumbledore when he says that, “and Remus and Peter.”

“Potter—“ Moody starts, but James doesn’t want to hear it.

“I won’t lie to them,” he says flatly. “Alice is right. They need to know, to keep themselves safe.”

“I’m telling Dorcas,” Marlene pipes up. “And Mary.”

They all stare back at the two old men defiantly. Moody looks like he's about to have an aneurism but Dumbledore only seems mildly amused.

"This is ridiculous—no, worse—this is reckless. Do you lot understand what is at stake here?" Moody demands.

"I think they are well aware of the stakes Alastor," Dumbledore interrupts before Alice can get going again. The older man's eyes sweep over them thoughtfully. "I trust you all to use your judgement. Tell who you must, but understand that you are taking a risk."

"Everything's a risk these days," Alice says firmly. Dumbledore tilts his head to her in silent concession, after all, it's not as though he can argue.

"This is a mistake," Moody growls.

"Your opinion is noted Alastor," Dumbledore says calmly.

The other man only shakes his head, arms crossed over his chest in disapproval. When it is clear that Dumbledore will be saying no more on the matter Moody turns his attention back to James and Marlene. "You good to go back on duty McKinnon or do you need more time to recover?"

Marlene grins, all scrapes and bruises magicked away. "Definitely ready."

Moody nods his approval. "Good girl," his eyes move on to James next.

"I'm good too," he says before the old man can ask, however, this is met with less enthusiasm.

"I'm gonna need you to see a Mind Healer first Potter."

James blinks. "I—what? Why?"

The room is uncomfortably silent as they all stare back at him. Eventually Alice steps forward.

"James," she says gently, like he's some wounded animal. "You killed someone. That's—that takes time to process. You need to give yourself that now so it doesn't grow into something harder to handle later."

Oh.

Right.

For a second, just a second, he considers telling them the truth. There's no way anyone in this room is the snitch. There just isn't. He wants them to know what Regulus did, wants to broach the topic of trying to get him out of Grimmauld to Dumbledore. But he promised. And if something were to happen to Regulus because of him...James would never forgive himself.

“I—er—right. I think I’m okay though. I don’t really, I mean, I’m processing on my own. I don’t really need a mind healer.”

“It’s protocol,” Moody says, like that settles it.

“Yeah, but, I’m not exactly an Auror am I? So it’s not like protocol really applies to me.”

Moody seems to consider this, hand running absentmindedly along the scar on the under-side of his chin. “Fair enough,” he says finally. “Up to you I suppose.”

James smiles and then—realizing immediately that that is absolutely an inappropriate response—quickly morphs his expression into something more solemn. “Great. Put me back on the rotation.”

“James—“ Alice starts, but Moody cuts her off.

“Leave it Prewett, the boy’s made his decision.”

Alice gives him a flat look. “Longbottom.”

“There are two Longbottoms in this room, it’s too confusing,” he waves her off causing Alice to roll her eyes while Marlene tries to stifle her laughter.

“Go on then you lot, get out of here,” Moody moves back behind his desk, groaning as he sits down. “Leave the grown-ups to our business.” James gets to his feet quickly, more than happy to be dismissed, though he sees Frank struggling to herd Alice out of the room.

Dumbledore offers James a small smile on his way towards the door. “Glad to see you recovering so quickly,” he says, though there feels like there’s something else behind those words. Like maybe he doesn’t quite buy James’s story about what happened in the shop.

Which is ridiculous.

There’s no reason for Dumbledore to be suspicious, he never knew about James and Regulus, Regulus made sure of that. James is just being paranoid. Still, he doesn’t want to risk saying the wrong thing so he just gives the old man a tight smile before following the others out of the room.

“Come on,” Alice throws an arm around Marlene’s shoulders as they walk through the chaos outside Moody’s office. “Let’s get lunch, our treat,” she nods at Frank.

“Gee thanks mum and dad,” James puts on a voice that makes Alice laugh.

“Is Lily free?” Marlene asks as they get into the elevator and head for the atrium. “You should tell her to come with.”

“Nah she’s out with Fenwick, looking into the new missing persons case.” They all nod silently. These days, when people go missing, they usually don’t come back.

After what happened at the shop, after seeing Regulus again, James had worried that things with Lily would be...different. But they aren't. He still feels the same rush of warmth when he sees her. Still loves the feel of her pressed to his chest when they fall asleep. Still loves going grocery shopping with her and listening to her rattle on about all the Muggle gadgets she misses, laughing with her about nothing—just because they're tired.

Seeing Regulus hasn't dulled what he feels for Lily. What it has done, is make clear to him that being with Lily hasn't dulled what he feels for Regulus. And that is a truth he doesn't know what to do with. Surely you're meant to love one person and then another, not two people at the same time? What he feels for Lily is so strong, so warm and comforting, that he'd just assumed it meant he no longer felt anything for Regulus. At least not in that way. But one look at him, one touch, and James is right back where he'd been two years ago. Hungry and desperate and hopelessly in love.

Maybe he does need to go to a Mind Healer...

"Oi," Alice snaps her fingers in front of his face and James startles. "Earth to Potter, we're trying to decide what to eat."

"Uh," James stutters as he tries to collect his thoughts. "Anything is fine with me. As long as it's edible."

Alice rolls her eyes. "Useless."

"There's that fish and chips place that's close," Frank volunteers.

"Is there somewhere to sit though?" Marlene asks. "Because I need a table."

Alice smirks. "Not a park bench kind of girl, huh?"

Marlene sighs, sounding genuinely upset about it; "I'm way too clumsy for that kind of thing. I'll get ketchup everywhere."

James is about to suggest that they just go outside and see what they can find, they're in downtown London after all, they're bound to run into something sooner or later, but then—

"Malfoy!" someone shouts across the atrium and James feels his whole body jolt to a stop, something cold dripping down his spine.

James has heard Lucius Malfoy's name countless times but he's never actually been in the same room as him. He turns to see a tall, slender, blonde haired man standing near the fountain. He's in an expensive looking set of black robes, surrounded by a group of other men who also appear to be wearing their wealth.

"James?"

He barely hears Alice this time, his entire being focused on the man a few feet away. He's always wondered what he'd feel if he ever saw him in the flesh. The person who hurt Regulus so deeply. I mean, he knew he would be angry, but the magnitude of it—he just wasn't sure what it would feel like.

It turns out it feels like ice. Cold and sharp and clear. There is no doubt in his mind about what he is going to do next. No wondering whether or not it's the right thing. There's only one option, one path his anger will let him take.

“James are you—James?”

He starts walking, making a B-line right for Lucius Malfoy.

He doesn't pull out his wand.

He isn't going to need it.

“Malfoy!” he shouts when he's within arms reach. The man has barely turned around before James throws his fist in his face, hearing the satisfying sound of something cracking. Malfoy stumbles back but James doesn't let him get far, grabbing the front of his robes and half-tackling half-pushing him to the ground. He hits the stone floor hard, James on top of him.

He lands another hit. And another. Malfoy has worked through his shock enough to start fighting back but he's at a disadvantage—already on the ground, already bleeding. James doesn't know why none of the men surrounding them try to pull him off, maybe they're too surprised. Or too frightened. James imagines he must be at least a little intimidating, what with their friend's blood dripping down his knuckles.

Finally he feels arms wrapping around him from behind, trying to pull him off. He's vaguely aware that there's shouting, he thinks he hears his name. He fights to get in one more hit, Lucius's eyes wide and right on him.

“Enough James!”

That's Frank. Frank rarely yells, at least off the Quidditch Pitch, and for some reason that's enough to make James pause—giving Frank the chance to pull him the rest of the way off.

“Where are the Aurors?” one of the men in the fancy robes is shouting. “I want the bloody Aurors! I want him arrested! This is assault! And in the Ministry of Magic of all places!”

“We are the Aurors,” Alice snaps at him. “Now someone take Malfoy to St Mungos before he gets blood all over the floor,” she gestures to Lucius who is currently being supported by two of his friends, clutching his face but never taking his eyes off of James.

“I know what you did to him, motherfucker!” James shouts, feeling somehow completely out of control and completely in control all at the same time. “I know what you fucking did!”

“Enough,” Frank starts dragging him away—James isn't even sure where they're going—Alice still arguing with the men behind them.

“What the hell was that James?” Marlene demands as she helps Frank shove him down the hallway. James doesn't answer, doesn't know how to. Instead he flexes his hands, feeling them burn.

He hadn't known how he would react to seeing Lucius Malfoy. Hadn't known how it would feel. But now he does. And he also knows, that if he sees him again, he'll fucking kill him.

PART III REGULUS

"Your turn," Regulus says, surveying the various cards in his hand. He sighs as his Queen of Hearts starts picking a fight with his Queen of Spades and he's forced to shuffle them.

His father kisses his teeth, propped up in bed gesturing to the cards lying on the mattress between them. "Look at this," he says teasingly. "You're destroying me. Me. Your father, a dying man, have you no mercy?"

Regulus smiles, rolling his eyes. "Just play your card papa."

"Always so serious," his father shakes his head, though he doesn't quite manage to hide his smile. "Just like your mother. Your brother on the other hand, he certainly knew how to have a good time." His father lets out a wheezy laugh and Regulus does his best to remain impassive. He talks about Sirius a lot these days, like he thinks he can summon him with his old anecdotes.

Regulus watches his father's play, recalculating before he makes his next move.

"A pair!" his father squawks. "Mon dieu."

"If this is your attempt to lull me into a false sense of security it's not working. I know you have a strong hand," Regulus says flatly.

Orion grins at him, watery eyes sparkling with mischief. "That's because you count the cards."

Regulus can't help but grin back. "I wonder who taught me that?"

His father laughs a little more heartily. "Fair enough mon chou," there's a loud crack just as he's playing his next card.

"Masters," Kreacher says, stepping forward.

"Ah," Orion smiles. "Is it time for tea yet?" Today is a good day, he's lucid and energetic and hungry. Regulus is trying to savour it. There aren't many good days.

"No Sir, my Mistress has asked that Master Regulus please come speak with her in the drawing room."

Regulus does his best to suppress a shiver. This, he imagines, will not be fun.

"Thank you Kreacher," Regulus says as he places his cards face down on the bedside table. "You can tell her I'll be right down."

Kreacher nods and with another crack disappears from the room. Regulus leans over and gives his father a kiss on the cheek. "I'll be right back," he says as he pulls away, and then points an accusing finger at him. "Don't cheat."

His father gasps dramatically. "Me? Cheat? How dare you!"

Regulus rolls his eyes. "Yeah, yeah," he says, smiling on his way into the hall.

He doesn't spend much time in the drawing room, that has more or less become his mother's domain. It's where the fireplace is, so she spends most days in and out, taking calls. Regulus isn't really sure who she's talking to or what she has to tell them but he mostly doesn't want to know.

"Come in," his mother says when he knocks.

The walls are covered in floral paper, his mother standing at the fireplace, hand resting on the mantle. Regulus closes the door and then stops a few feet in, hands clasped behind his back, waiting. The silence between them lasts far longer than he would like but he doesn't fidget, not even when her eyes run him up and down, no doubt looking for imperfections. There's something slightly off in her expression but Regulus isn't sure what it is.

"You've done your family proud these last few years," she says finally, startling Regulus.

"Oh—I—thank you?" he still doesn't move, doesn't relax his posture, watching his mother warily.

She nods her head, as if deciding something. "I think it's time you married."

Regulus chokes on his next inhale, hands going to his throat as he coughs and splutters. "What?" he manages to get out, looking up to see his mother still standing at the fireplace, her brow arched.

"You're a young man, the head of the household, it is time you had a wife. Someone from a suitable family. It will send the right message."

Regulus is struggling to keep up. "The right message?"

"That the House of Black is strong, that it is alive and well and continuing on."

Continuing on.

Oh Jesus.

"I—maman I'm not—there isn't even anyone I'm...courting," he struggles through his shock, trying to get his brain to start working again, to figure out what to say to convince her that this is a terrible idea.

His mother waves a dismissive hand. "That makes no difference, there are several families with daughters your age. I will make the arrangements."

Fuck.

Panic is slowly starting to build in his chest. “I really don’t think this is...the time. Not with everything...” he swallows around the rock in his throat. “I’d rather not...I think we should wait.”

His mother’s face is as cold and hard as stone, no feeling in her eyes. “You must Regulus. You must have a son. You know this. These things must happen.”

He supposes he did know that, but he’s never really thought about it, about what it would actually mean. He has no plan for this. It just seems so...twisted. He can’t be with...a woman. Merlin, how is he going to make a child? He wonders absentmindedly if there’s a potion for this sort of thing.

“You have done so well Regulus,” his mother finally says, breaking the silence. Regulus looks up at her. “Don’t let me down now.” There’s something about her voice, about the intensity—the emphasis she places on her words—that makes Regulus wonder if maybe his father told her. Told her about Regulus. Told her that he’s...something squirms low in his gut.

“Okay maman,” he says eventually, partially because he’s scared and partially because there’s nothing else he can say. There never is. “If that’s what you feel is best.”

Walburga nods approvingly. “Good boy.”

It’s early evening by the time Regulus gets back to Grimmauld but he’s fucking exhausted. He climbs the stairs to his bedroom, shutting the door and immediately crawling under the covers without even getting undressed. He just doesn’t want to think for a moment, doesn’t want to deal with the anxiety boiling inside of him, clawing at his skin. He just wants the darkness of sleep to swallow him up. He’ll figure out how to put this off tomorrow, how to convince his mother there’s another way. Or maybe convince himself that he can do it. He’s never tried being with a girl before. In fact, he’s never really tried being with anyone except James.

He squeezes his eyes more firmly shut, curling onto his side and ignoring the memories that come to mind. The warmth of being in James’s arms again, the overwhelming sense of

Here.

Here is where I’m meant to be.
I’ve been away too long.

I’m so happy to be home again.

It isn’t useful to think like that. To feel like that. It was a fluke that James and him ended up in that shop together that night. It won’t happen again and that’s probably a good thing if either of them wants to stay alive.

Regulus slowly drifts. The world grows fuzzy and distant and dark. He hasn't been sleeping well since the raid on the shop. It isn't that he's all that bothered about killing Snyder. It had to be done and he'd do it again. But. But for some reason it's gone and rattled something in him. He keeps dreaming of being in the back garden in Scotland, with Bellatrix and Lucius and his mother all trying to get him to kill the rabbit. Except then the rabbit isn't a rabbit. It's Johnathan.

No, please, please, please.

I'm a good man.

I swear.

I'm going to get married.

Sometimes he's tied up—in a pen like the rabbits—but other times he's free and he crawls right up to Regulus's feet. His face so clear Regulus swears he's really there.

Please, please, please.

I love her.

I promised I'd come back.

We're going to start a family.

Have mercy.

He kills him. Every time. In every dream. No matter how badly he tries not to. How loudly he screams at himself to put his wand down. He does it. Usually he wakes up crying. On his more shameful nights he wets the bed. He's started thinking maybe Narcissa isn't the only one who needs some dreamless sleep.

He drifts away as early evening turns to late evening. And everything is okay, thoughts perhaps too tied up with trying to overcome the threat of marriage to conjure any other nightmares. It's looking like he might actually get a full night's sleep.

Until.

He doesn't know exactly what's happening. He can't breathe. And there's a weight. He's being crushed, something is crushing him—it feels like the roof's caved in, that it's lying on top of him. He's struggling and gasping and then the weight is gone from his throat and it's pinning his wrists above his head and that's not the roof. Roofs don't move like that. Don't have hands.

Regulus's eyes blink open, desperately trying to clear up the blurry world around him.

"James Potter?" comes an indignant voice.

His heart seizes, stuttering in his chest, fear so raw it is a physical pain. It's Lucius. Lucius is on top of him, holding him down. He's been here before. He doesn't want to be here again. "James fucking Potter?" he sounds hysterical and while Regulus bucks and pulls and desperately tries to wrench himself free he notices the blood on Lucius's face—split lip, broken nose, eyes swallowed by deep blue bruises. Something's happened. He doesn't know what. He doesn't care. He just needs Lucius to stop touching him.

"Get off of me!" he finally manages, but Lucius just laughs, nails digging into Regulus's wrists.

"You pathetic little slut, letting the enemy fuck you. Tell me, did you do it to get back at Sirius, huh? At least that I could respect. Does he know? Did it break his little blood traitor heart?"

"Get off of me!" Regulus shouts again, he doesn't know how Lucius figured it out, how he possibly could have all these years later, but he doesn't care. He doesn't care about anything right now except being free of the weight on top of him. He can't breathe again and this time it isn't because there's a hand on his throat. The panic is like a wild animal trapped inside his skin, furiously clawing and scrambling and biting its way out.

"You've forgotten your place Regulus," Lucius drops his face down, so close Regulus can feel his breath and he isn't proud of the noise that comes out of him then. A whine. A sob.

"Please," he says finally, weakly. "Please Lucius please."

"Aw," the older man says. "How cute. Tell me, did you beg James Potter too?"

Regulus closes his eyes, still trying to rip his hands out of Lucius's grasp.

Accio wand, he thinks. Accio wand. Accio wand. Accio wand.

Please.

Please.

Accio wand.

Accio wand.

Acci—fuck, where did he put it? Why didn't he lock his fucking door.

"Come now Regulus?" Lucius says, voice still far too close. "We used to have fun you and I. Don't you remember? You were always such a good sport back then."

I can't believe this is happening again, Regulus thinks helplessly. I can't believe I let this happen again.

"Get off of him Lucius."

Regulus's eyes fly open and find Narcissa standing above them, wand pointed at the back of Lucius's head. Lucius goes stock-still.

"Cissy it—"

"Get. Off. Of. Him," she jabs her wand more forcefully into Lucius's head and he winces.

"You gonna curse me darling?" he asks bitingly.

"You think I won't?" her voice doesn't waver but Regulus thinks he can see the tiny sparks of fear in the corners of her eyes. His heart is still jack hammering in his chest—so fast it's painful.

It feels like hours before Lucius finally moves, giving Regulus's wrists one last squeeze before he lifts himself off, standing up straight and smoothing out his shirt. He's toe to toe with Narcissa, looming several inches taller.

"You should be careful," he says smoothly.

"I could say the same to you," she hisses, wand held between them. They glare at one another for a long minute, Regulus still on the bed, too afraid to move or breathe or make a sound. He spots his wand on the bedside table, just out of reach. If he needs to he thinks he can lunge for it, thinks he'll get there in time.

"Well, Regulus," Lucius says, running a hand over his hair, smoothing it out. "I do hope matrimony suits you better than it has me."

Regulus blinks, mind too slow to understand. It isn't until Lucius has left the room, walking pointedly around Narcissa and letting the door slam behind him, that Regulus finally connects the dots.

Walburga's sudden interest in his marriage isn't out of the blue. He'd been right, she knows, but it wasn't his father who told her about Regulus's inclinations. It was Lucius. And of course her solution is to have him married off before it becomes public knowledge. Before the pureblood families refuse him their daughters for fear that he won't be able to perform his duty. Regulus almost laughs as he slides off his bed and onto the floor, pulling his knees into his chest and trying to breathe. He wants to disappear. He wants to not still feel Lucius on his skin.

"What happened?" he finally manages, because clearly he's missed something. Narcissa is still standing where Lucius left her, looking down on him.

"James Potter attacked him in the atrium of the Ministry," she says flatly, though the disapproval is clear on her face. Regulus sits with that for a minute, his brain still moving slowly.

"Attacked?" he finally manages, looking at his knees. "How?"

"With his fists," she nearly spits the words. "Like some ingrate, it was pathetic."

“Because your husband lost?”

The silence that follows confirms what Regulus suspected. There’s no stopping James Potter once he’s started. Lucius didn’t stand a chance. Regulus should be angry, given how fucking stupid it was, how reckless and thoughtless. Considering what it just put him through. But James has always been the only person who ever really wanted to fight for Regulus. Who refused to believe he wasn’t worth it. And he can’t help but take comfort in the fact that it’s still true. After all this time. James said he wouldn’t give up on him and he hasn’t.

“Did Potter—“

“Oh don’t feign formality for my sake,” Narcissa interrupts coldly.

Regulus rolls his eyes. “Did James say something?”

“About sleeping with you?” she asks bluntly, making Regulus flinch though he doesn’t know why. “No. I don’t think so. Had enough sense not to go screaming out your name. But he clearly said something to tip Lucius off.”

He looks up at Narcissa, inspecting her face. “You’re not surprised.”

She arches her brow. “That James Potter is a reckless baffoon? No, I’m not.”

But Regulus only shakes his head. “You knew already. Knew about—“ his words choke, some part of his brain desperate not to say the truth out loud in this house even under the current circumstances. But Narcissa doesn’t appear to need him to.

“He showed up here.”

Regulus blinks. “What.”

She rolls her eyes as though it’s ridiculous that he should need any further clarification. “I was on my way over one night and I found James Potter loitering in the park.”

Regulus continues to stare at her, not knowing what to do with that information. “When?” he finally manages to ask.

She waves her hand dismissively. “Years ago, I don’t know, before you left school.”

“Before I left school,” Regulus repeats numbly. It’s too much and it’s too hard. He squeezes his eyes shut.

“Of all the people Regulus, honestly.”

“You’re judging me?” he asks with a humourless laugh. “When your husband just tried to—“

“Don’t!” she cuts him off.

Regulus only shakes his head. “Whatever Cissy.”

“You should be grateful, I just put myself on the line for you.”

“Yes, I’m aware,” he says bitterly. “No doubt it was meant as payback for the fertility potion I gave you. Now we’re even right? Your debt paid.” She doesn’t respond, which is as much a confirmation as anything.

“I can’t believe you’re going to give that man a child,” he’s almost sick just thinking about it. About his role in it.

“I told you, it won’t really be his.” The tone of her voice suggests this isn’t a new argument, but rather one she has with herself frequently.

He scoffs. “If you say so.”

“If you’re just going to be a brat I’ll go.”

“Go then,” his hands are still shaking where they grip his knees.

There’s a moment of stillness, her eyes on him, he can feel them without even looking. He’s always liked Narcissa best, but he isn’t sure that means much in this family. Eventually she starts towards the door, wooden floor creaking under her steps.

“You promised,” Regulus doesn’t know why he bothers, but sitting here on the floor, curled in a ball, he can’t help it. Narcissa looks back at him, hand on the door.

“You promised you would protect your child, if you had one.”

She eyes him for a moment before nodding. “I will.”

“Good. Because I swear to God Narcissa if you let him use this kid I will kill you.” He doesn’t think he means it. He’s almost certain he doesn’t. But then, he’s done it twice before with his wand, and who knows how many times his potions have been used to end someone’s life. It’s not as though he can pretend he isn’t a killer. Not anymore.

After a long moment of silence something like a smile actually ghosts across Narcissa’s lips. “I believe you.”

The next thing Regulus hears is the click of the door closing.

PART IV JAMES

“Mum?” James calls out as he walks inside the house. He kicks off his shoes, not bothering to pay much attention to where they land as Lily closes the door behind them.

“Mum?” James calls out again. “Dad? Mimi?”

James walks down the hall a little ways, finding the door to his father’s office wide open, lights off, fireplace empty. “Weird,” he mutters.

“Maybe they got called into the Ministry?” Lily asks, coming up behind him and placing her hand on his lower back.

“No, they would have said—mum would have said,” he keeps looking at the room, trying to figure out exactly what it is that feels so off. “My mother takes Sunday dinner very seriously.”

Lily looks like she’s about to say something when the sudden turning of the doorknob catches their attention.

“Your favourite son has arrived!” Sirius sings as Remus and him tumble through the front door. Sirius throwing his arms open wide as though expecting his entrance to garner applause.

“They’re not here you prat,” James says.

“Oh James, I didn’t see you there, how awkward. Well, I suppose you were going to find out eventually.”

James rolls his eyes. “You’re not the favourite.”

“Mm, kind of am though.”

“Nuh uh.”

“Yeah huh.”

“Nuh uh!”

“Yeah—“

“Hey Remus,” Lily interrupts, closing the gap between the couples as she pulls Remus in for a hug. “It’s good to see you.”

“Yeah,” Remus smiles pulling away. “Yeah, good to see you too. I’ve been locked up with this loon the last few days and I think my brain has started leaking out my ears.”

“Oi!” Sirius says indignantly.

James snickers. “Well, I guess we all know you’re not Moony’s favourite.”

Sirius gasps dramatically, jabbing an accusatory finger at him. “You take that back!”

“Nope.”

Sirius frowns for a minute before a smirk tugs at his lips. “You know what? It’s fine.”

James looks at him skeptically. “It is?”

“Yup,” he pops his ‘p’. “Because for one, it’s a dirty and vicious lie, we all know I’m Moony’s favourite. Or at least my mouth is,” he gives Remus a wink that has the other boy

choking and Lily laughing beside him.

“Gross,” James says flatly. “What’s your second point?”

Sirius grins. “We all know Evans would shag me over you in a heartbeat.”

This only serves to increase Lily’s laughter.

“Bullocks,” James says, but Sirius shrugs.

“Sorry mate, these are just the facts.”

James turns to Lily. “Babe, back me up here?”

But she’s grabbed hold of her stomach still laughing. “I can’t breathe.” James rolls his eyes.

“Have I ever mentioned that I hate that you two are friends?”

Sirius snorts, holding his hand out to Lily who high-fives him.

“They are a bit of an unholy alliance aren’t they?” Remus says as he eyes their partners with amusement.

At that moment the door opens for the third time, Sirius jumping out of the way, just barely avoiding being hit.

“Merlin Peter,” he says as he mimes dusting himself off. “Don’t you knock?” James is pretty sure that Sirius has never knocked before walking into his parent’s house.

“Sorry,” Peter mutters, taking in the scene around him. “What’re you all doing standing by the front door?”

“Parents aren’t home,” James shrugs, earning him a justifiably confused look from Peter.

“Really? That doesn’t sound like them.”

Something like worry tickles the back of James’s mind but he shakes it off. “C’mon, we’ll wait for them in the kitchen, I’ll send an owl or something, see if Moody knows anything.”

There’s general agreement, Peter throwing his shoes in a pile with James’s as he follows the rest of them down the hall.

“Merlin I’m so hungry,” Sirius whines, rubbing his stomach like a toddler. “Your mum said there were going to be those garlic mashed potatoes and I’ve been thinking about them all day,” he makes an orgasmic noise.

“Keep it in your pants Black,” Remus says, elbowing him in the side.

None of the lights are on. Which is weird, usually if his parents aren’t home Mimi still keeps the house running. Of course, for all James knows turning the lights off might be a new safety protocol Moody has them doing.

It's Lily who notices first, freezing beside him as they enter the kitchen. "James," she grabs his wrist.

"What is it?" he looks at her paling face and then follows her eyes to the table.

His mum is sitting slumped over in an unnatural position, her face hidden in the crook of her arm. And instantly everything in James crumbles.

"Mum?" he scrambles to her side, voice tight. "Mum?" he feels it the second he touches her—the stillness. It sends shivers down his spine. "Mum? Talk to me. Talk to me—mum?" he pulls her back, it's hard, like she's fighting him, like her joints have rusted in place.

Something smashes—in his struggle to see her face he's knocked a tea cup off the table. He hears it crunch under his feet. "Mum, please? Please? Mum?" his voice is trembling so badly the words are barely intelligible. Her eyes are open but they don't look at James, and he becomes vaguely aware of the sores covering her skin. She's so cold. Before he can think about it he starts rubbing his hands up and down her arms like he can warm her up.

"Mum," his legs give out, he's on his knees now, hands still holding her up. "Please, please, oh, please don't. Please don't. I'm sorry, I'm sorry," he doesn't even know what he's saying anymore words just coming out of him. "Mum—I can't—I need—please."

He hears talking behind him but he barely registers what any of it means. His whole world cracking.

"Get the fire in his father's study going, call Dumbledore, Moody—and get them to bring a fucking Healer. You two check the rest of the house, see if anyone else is here."

"Sirius—"

"I'm staying with him."

"Are you—"

"It doesn't matter."

"Sirius."

"He needs me, I'll—he needs me, so I'm going to be here," there's the smallest shake in his voice. "Now go check the rest of the house."

There are no more words and a second later Sirius is on the floor at James's side.

"We have to get her to Mungos," he says, not taking his eyes off of his mother, still holding onto her fiercely. "Maybe they can—they can fix—they can help. There has to be something they can do."

"People are coming," Sirius says calmly. "People are coming, okay James?"

He shakes his head. "She can't be dead Sirius."

“I know.”

“No, no, no she can’t, she can’t. I need her. I need her. Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god,” and suddenly he’s sobbing, his whole body shaking as Sirius wraps him in his arms.

“I’ve got you,” he says, James’s heart punching holes in the walls of his chest. “I’ve got you. I’m here.”

Wake up.

James thinks.

Wake up.

Nothing kills Euphemia Potter. She’s a force. She’s unstoppable. She loves us too much to die.

Wake up.

Wake up.

Wake up.

But he doesn’t. No matter how hard he tries he’s still on the kitchen floor of his childhood home, his best friend wrapped around him like a shield, his mother’s cold hand in his.

There are footsteps but James doesn’t move and neither does Sirius.

“What is it?” Sirius asks above him.

“James,” that’s Remus. “James I’m so sorry, I’m so, so, sorry.”

“What is it?” Sirius demands again, and he’s trying to be strong but James can hear the shaking in his voice. The barely restrained pain.

“Fleamont,” it’s Peter who answers. “Upstairs bedroom. The house elf too.”

“Holy shit. What the fuck happened here?” Sirius’s arms tighten around James who can barely process anything.

More footsteps. “Moody and Dumbledore are on their way,” that’s Lily. “Moody said not to touch anything. He said—” her voice breaks, “he said not to touch them.”

There’s a moment of silence. “Why?” Sirius asks, voice tight.

“Because we don’t know what happened, we don’t know if there’s evidence or if whatever—whatever killed them, if it—”

“—can be passed on by touch,” Remus finishes for her with horrified understanding.

More silence.

“James,” Lily says finally. “James you have to—“

“No. No fucking way,” he holds onto his mother’s hand more tightly. He can’t let her go. He can’t. He’ll never get her back if he does. He can’t lose her if he doesn’t let her go.

“Sirius don’t,” he says when he feels his best friend move, terrified that he’s going to fight him. That he’s going to take her away.

Please don’t take her away.

Oh god.

Oh god.

Oh god.

He lifts his head, Sirius’s eyes meeting his. For a moment nothing happens and then Sirius reaches out and takes Euphemia’s other hand.

“Sirius,” Remus says nervously from behind, but Sirius doesn’t flinch, doesn’t look away from James.

“You and me,” he says, his voice fraying at the edges. “It’s you and me okay?”

James nods, clinging to Sirius almost as desperately as he clings to his mum.

“You and me,” James repeats, and while it’s always been true, it’s never felt so fucking painful before.

Chapter End Notes

****FRENCH TRANSLATION****

"As I was walking by the clear fountain, I found the water so lovely I had to bathe. I've loved you for so long, I will never forget you"

"Under the oak's leaves, I lay and dried. On the highest bough, a nightingale sang. I've loved you for so long, I will never forget you. Sing, nightingale, sing, you who has a joyous heart. Your heart is made for laughing... mine can only cry. I've loved you for so long, I will never forget you." (song: À la claire fontaine)

Hello beautiful people!!!

LISTEN. The Dragon Pox thing will be addressed okay. It will. I promise there won't be another time jump or anything, what happened to Euphemia and Fleamont is gonna be explored in the next chapter. Like I said at the beginning I'm sort of reinterpreting canon in a way that I think tells a better story (in my opinion, I'm not saying it actually IS

better). Also I know that technically they die after Lily and James's wedding but I am ignoring that fact, hopefully that doesn't bother too many people, but I apologize if that's a big issue for anyone.

THANK YOU all for being so sweet and supportive with the comments and Kudos and messages and everything it's truly so so so incredible I cannot even describe it to you. Hopefully this chapter wasn't a let down and also hopefully you're doing okay wherever you're at, sending you all the warm fuzzies!

Chapter 45

Chapter Summary

Merry-day-late-Christmas

Chapter Notes

tw: discussion of miscarriages

tw: discussion of death

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

PART I EUPHEMIA

March 1960

Oh no.

No.

Euphemia has been here before. Been here too many times.

“No, darling, no please,” she whispers, hand placed protectively over her stomach as another pain rocks through her body.

She’s losing her baby.

She’s losing her baby again.

Even in her head that thought sounds like a sob.

Grimacing she stands up, feeling something wet on her thighs—blood. It’s always blood.

“Mimi!” she calls out as loud as she can manage, wobbling over to the fireplace and gripping the mantle. There’s a crack and the house elf appears at her side, looking up with great concern.

“Can you go to Mr. Potter’s office please,” she says with difficulty. “Tell him—tell him—” her eyes close briefly. “That I’m going to St Mungo’s. He’ll know what’s happened,” they’ve been through it enough.

The house elf nods. “Mistress is certain she doesn’t want Mimi to come with her?”

She offers the elf a tight smile. “I’ll be alright, but thank you.”

The elf nods before there’s another crack and she disappears. After a few laboured breaths Euphemia throws some floo powder into the fire and steps through. She’s in too much pain to Apparate.

Euphemia Potter has always dreamed of being a mother. She wants a dozen children, wants a house filled with chaos, with the sounds of little feet pitter-pattering across the floors and little voices giggling and little hands getting themselves into trouble. She’s made lists of the things she wants to show her children and the places she wants to take them and the important things she wants them to know. She’s so ready for this. Has been for years. Decades.

It never occurred to her that it would be this hard.

That her body was a place where nothing could grow.

The miscarriages seem endless. Each heartbreak leaving her and Fleamont a little less hopeful. They’ve tried everything—every potion and charm and talisman—nothing seems capable of giving them a child. But this time. This time really had been different. She had never carried a baby this long before.

When she gets to St Mungo’s she’s ushered into a private room. Medi wizards run their diagnostics and promise her the Healer will be with her shortly before leaving her alone. Euphemia sits upright in bed, arms cradling her whale of a stomach as she tries not to cry. Instead she closes her eyes, taking in deep breaths and making a list of all the things in her life that make her happy. She tries to remember that this moment will not last forever and this pain will fade eventually even if that seems impossible right now.

“I love you so much,” she whispers. “Even if this is all the time we get to have together I want you to know that I don’t love you any less,” her voice quivers ever so slightly but she comforts herself with the knowledge that no one is around to hear it.

A few minutes later the door flies open and Euphemia looks up to see her frazzled husband blustering into the room. Wild brown hair flying about—it’s longer than it ever has been before, well past his ears and on its way to his shoulders. It makes him look young.

“Sorry,” he gushes, coming to her side and kissing the top of her head as he wraps his arm around her. “I came as soon as I could.”

“It’s alright, not as though there’s much to do now,” she gives him a watery smile and watches pity fill his eyes.

“Oh my love,” he says, hands coming to gently cup her face. “This is not the end. We’ll try again.”

Those words are a knife in her heart. “No I—I think this is it for me Monty.”

Confusion flits across his face. “What?”

She bites her lower lip, hoping to stop its trembling. “I can’t do this again. It’s too hard.”

Fleamont looks genuinely shocked, mouth opening and closing several times as words fail him. She feels so guilty. He would have been such a wonderful father.

“Effie—“

But at that moment the Healer enters the room and Fleamont cuts himself off. Effie straightens her posture, fixing her face. She can have a good cry about this once she’s home, alone, locked in a bathroom, the shower running so Monty can’t hear. That’s how she’s managed it all the other times.

The Healer looks up from her clipboard and smiles. “Hello Mrs. and Mr. Potter, I’m Healer Hathaway, I’ll be attending you today. Everything seems to be progressing rather nicely so far. This is your first child correct?” her eyes are a warm brown and they bounce between Euphemia and Fleamont, waiting for an answer.

“I—I’m sorry,” Euphemia screws her face up, trying to understand. “What did you just say?”

Healer Hathaway’s bright expression flickers for a moment. “I asked if this was your first child,” she looks back down at the pages in front of her. “There’s no note here about any previous births but it’s possible the Medi wizards missed something.”

Fleamont’s hand has found her’s and he gives it a strong squeeze. “Are you saying,” Euphemia tries but her voice cuts out so she has to cough and start again. “Are you saying I’m having a baby?”

Now the Healer looks quite visibly confused. “Yes? You’re in labour. Didn’t you...know that?”

“A living baby?”

“I’m sorry, I feel like we’ve missed something here. Did no one care to mention to you what would be happening at the end of your pregnancy?” the Healer asks.

Before Euphemia can stop herself she bursts out in hysterical laughter. “We did it. We actually did it. Monty, we’re having a baby, we’re really having a baby this time,” she looks up at her husband who’s smiling too, tears in his eyes.

“We’re having a baby,” he whispers back, leaning forward to kiss the top of her head again, and then her temple, her cheek, her nose. “We’re having a baby,” he presses his forehead to her’s and for a moment they just stay like that, Euphemia feeling as though she has a dozen stars trapped in her chest, sparkling and glowing and burning bright.

Eventually she pulls away, wiping quickly at her cheeks before turning back to the Healer. “Sorry,” she laughs a little again. “What were you saying?”

“Uh...” the Healer looks between them, like she’s debating asking for an explanation before eventually seeming to decide it’s none of her business. “Well, now that we seem to be on the same page, I’d like to perform a physical examination, see how dilated you are and then we’ll go from there, alright?”

Euphemia is beaming. “Yes, yes, perfect, whatever you need to do,” a delirious giggle escapes her, the hands on her stomach flexing. “I’m ready.”

It’s hard. Well. Obviously. Childbirth does have a reputation to uphold. It’s hard, but it’s also magical—not like a spell or a potion, but the way falling in love is magical. Sunsets are magical. The night sky. Something beyond comprehension and yet so beautiful to behold. For the rest of her life Euphemia Potter will never forget the first moment she hears James’s voice. Crying in the Healer’s arms, all bloody and pink and wrinkly. All beautiful and delicate and breathtaking.

“Let me have him,” her voice is rough, her body wrung out. Still she reaches for him with a desperation she has never known before and the second his skin touches her’s she cries.

“Oh hi,” she says through the tears, kissing the top of his head. “I’m so happy to meet you. You’re so lovely, you’re so perfect.”

Monty is at her side, hair standing on end from all the fretting he’s been doing. He never could stand to see her in pain. “Wow,” his voice cracks as he reaches out, running the backs of his fingers gently down James’s arm. “He’s really ours then?”

Euphemia lets out a wet laugh that has the baby blinking up at her. “Yes, all ours.”

For a moment there’s silence. Well, I mean, the room itself is full of noise and traffic, but the three Potter’s suddenly seem to be in a world all their own.

“Merlin this kid is going to be such a brat,” Fleamont says eventually.

“Monty!”

“He’ll be spoiled rotten between the pair of us.”

Euphemia smiles, nuzzling her son’s head; “Good.” She’s half falling asleep but she doesn’t want to give him back yet. “I love you so much,” she whispers. “I’ll love you always. No matter what. I’ll be here whenever you need me,” she barely resists the urge to squeeze him until his little head pops off.

“Like I said,” Monty is looking down at them with unbridled fondness. “A brat.”

“Our brat though.”

“Our monster.”

She giggles, feeling a little delusional. “He’ll be unstoppable.”

“Like his mother then.”

She looks up at him, smiling so widely it hurts her face. Monty brushes the hair from her forehead. “I didn’t know I could feel this happy.”

He smiles back at her. “I love you.”

She turns her head, kissing his hand as he starts pulling away. “I love you too.” The baby on her chest gurgles as if in agreement and it nearly has Effie in tears again, though she expects she’s allowed a few obscene displays of emotion under the present circumstances.

“This feels right doesn’t it?” Monty says after a small pause. Somehow she manages to pull her eyes away from her baby to look up at him.

“What do you mean?”

Fleamont has eyes only for James. “We were missing something before. And now we’re whole,” he shrugs. “The three of us. It feels...right.”

Effie’s heart nearly gives out it can barely take it. “Yes,” she says a little breathlessly. “Yes it does.”

PART II JAMES

1979

He sits at his father’s bedside in St Mungo’s. He’s in a comma, has been for the last three days. Nobody is saying it yet, at least not to James’s face, but they don’t expect him to recover. Still, James is here. Waiting. One way or the other.

His mother is dead.

She was dead before they got there.

Poison.

Moody and Dumbledore are discussing what they think happened. What they want to do about it. James tries, but he can’t seem to bring himself to care at the moment.

“This wasn’t personal,” Moody says, which has James looking up for the first time in a while. “This wasn’t some vendetta. Euphemia and Fleamont were important to the cause. They gave people confidence. This was political.”

“Feels pretty personal,” James says flatly. He’s done a lot of crying the last few days. And screaming. And begging. There’s not much left in him at the moment.

Maybe for the first time ever James sees Moody’s expression soften. “I didn’t mean—“

But James waves him off, eyes dropping back down to his father's stiff body. "I know what you meant. It's fine."

Sirius moves behind him, squeezing the back of James's neck, Remus knocking their shoulders' together, Peter nudging his foot. The three of them have been here as much as possible. When Peter isn't working and Sirius and Remus aren't with the Order. They keep touching him, like they're keeping him together, gathering him up when he starts to crumble. Those touches say,

We're here.

Those touches say,

It's us and always us. No matter what you lose you will never be alone. We bleed together. And we cry together. And we survive.

Those touches say,

You don't have to be strong enough to carry this on your own. We will do it for you. With you.

This isn't their first time dealing with this kind of loss and that truth feels unbearable to James. Because it isn't fair. Life wasn't supposed to be like this. Wasn't supposed to be this endless tragedy. Voldemort and his followers have stolen the future they were supposed to have. And it makes James want to claw his eyes out.

"What the fuck?" Sirius demands.

James blinks, returning to the conversation. Sirius is glaring at Moody who glares right back.

"That's bullshit."

"It's strategic," Moody grumbles. "Having people panicking is only going to lead to reckless behaviour and careless mistakes, which is exactly what Voldemort wants. We have to keep people calm."

"It's—" Sirius seems to struggle to find the right word. "It's disrespectful!" he decides on eventually. "They deserve better than that."

"Better than what?" James can feel it, everyone looking at him, uncomfortable with the fact that he's clearly been too zoned out to hear what was said. Another reminder that he isn't handling this well. And he isn't. He has enough self-awareness to know that.

"Moody wants to have the official cause of death be recorded as Dragon Pox," Lily steps forward. When he meets her eyes she gives him a small smile, like she understands that it's hard for him to pay attention right now. He tries to return it.

"They deserve justice," Sirius goes on. "They were fucking murdered. Are you even looking for the person who did it?"

“We know who did it,” Moody snaps back. “We’ve been trying to get them for years now incase you haven’t noticed.”

“No, no fuck the war. I want you opening a case for the Potters. I want you to treat this like you would any other murder. This wasn’t a fight, didn’t happen in battle, it’s a crime and you’re a fucking Auror so do something about it.”

“You don’t think this is an act of war? Of battle?” Moody goes on. “Sure it is, and Euphemia and Fleamont lost. They lost. They let someone in those wards, or they told someone something—something that let them sneak poison into their bloody tea. You think wars are only fought with wands, boy? This is what I keep trying to get you lot to understand, every word out of your mouths is a play in the game. Is a weapon that can be turned against you. People are dying everyday because of it. The Potters lost. We don’t have the fucking resources to launch an independent investigation but even if we did I wouldn’t. Their deaths cannot be separated from the war just because you think your pain matters more.”

James can feel Sirius vibrating with anger beside him. He wonders how much longer they can go like this before Sirius takes a shot at Moody.

“You—“

“It’s fine,” James interrupts. He feels exhausted by this. Who knew death came with so many complications. “Say it was Dragon Pox if you think that’s better,” he looks at his father again, reaching out for his hand and squeezing. “Though you may want to wait before you start giving my dad a cause of death. You know. Since he’s not dead.”

“Of course,” Dumbledore says, one of the only things he has said. As always he seems to be here more to observe than to participate.

“There’s also the matter of setting a date, do you want to do that now or are you hoping to wait for Fleamont to...well,” Moody actually seems a bit uncomfortable, but James doesn’t understand the question.

“Set a date?” he asks.

“For your mother’s funeral. The Potter’s have a crypt, I expect you know, your mother expressed that she wanted to be laid to rest there with your father so that will have to be arranged as well.”

Everyone looks at James expectantly. Like he should have an answer for this. Like he should have been thinking about this. And maybe he should have been. He gives it all another second to sink in before squeezing his father’s hand and getting to his feet.

“No date,” he says firmly.

“No date?” Moody demands.

“No date. No funeral. No crypt.”

“What’re you just going to keep your mother’s dead body in your house or something?” Peter asks, earning him an elbow from Sirius.

But James isn’t offended. He looks his friend dead in the eye and nods. “Yes.”

“Wait, what?” Remus asks in shock.

“I’m not burying her,” I’m not letting her go. I’m not going to shut her up in some place where she’ll never see the sun. This isn’t fair. And it wasn’t supposed to happen. This isn’t my life. I refuse to let this be my life.

“James,” Lily starts but doesn’t seem to know how to finish.

He turns back to Moody. “No date,” he says for the third time and then, while everyone still seems to be at a loss for words; “I’m going for a walk.”

He pushes out the door before anyone can stop him, leaving the room silent in his wake.

PART III REGULUS

“Would you wear dress robes or a Muggle suit d’you think?”

Regulus rolls his eyes. Cerci and him are lying on their backs on the floor of his bedroom, Boo sitting happily in the corner watching over them.

“I’m not getting married,” he says, even though he still hasn’t figured out how he’s going to convince his mother of that.

“My sister says Muggle suits are very fashionable right now,” Cerci goes on as if she hasn’t heard him.

“My mother is trying to force me into an arranged marriage I don’t think we’re quite progressive enough for Muggle suits.”

Cerci hums in agreement. “I guess that’s fair. Oh well, you look good in your dress robes so I’m sure your bride won’t be too disappointed.”

Regulus groans, bringing his hands up to cover his face. “This is such a fucking nightmare”.

A moment passes before Cerci knocks their feet together. “Have you thought about, y’know, just telling her no? You are an adult, technically, and she doesn’t even live here anymore.”

Regulus fixes her with a pointed look. You don’t say “no” to Walburga Black and live to tell the tale.

This time Cerci is the one to roll her eyes. “Alright, alright, have you thought of telling her you’re gay? At least then she might set you up with a nice eligible bachelor instead.”

Regulus snorts, the very idea ludicrous. “I’m pretty sure she already knows, besides, how many gay pureblood marriages do you know of?”

She screws up her face like she’s genuinely trying to think of some. “None,” she admits eventually.

“Exactly.”

Another moment passes before Cerci rolls onto her side so that she’s facing him. “How did you know?”

He arches his brow. “How did I know what?”

“That you were gay?”

Regulus lets out a breath that’s almost a laugh, swiping a hand over his face. “Merlin, I don’t know,” he’s not sure even he can manage to untangle the complicated web that is his sexuality. “I didn’t think about it until the moment I did and then it seemed obvious.”

Cerci hums. “And what did you do after that?”

“Tried not to think about it again.”

Cerci reaches out, squeezing his hand briefly before pulling back again, using her arm as a pillow. “I don’t—“ she starts and then stops, nose all scrunched up the way it gets when she can’t find the right words. “I don’t feel that way...about anyone.”

Regulus watches her for a moment, trying to parcel through what she’s just said. For the first time since he’s known her Cerci seems almost timid. Embarrassed. “You don’t feel what way?” he asks slowly.

“I—“ and then she immediately shuts her mouth, making a frustrated noise. “I don’t feel like...like I want to...you know.”

But he doesn’t, not really, and this seems important so he doesn’t want to go making any assumptions. “I’m going to need a few more words.”

She blows out a breath. “You’re supposed to be a genius.”

Regulus rolls his eyes. “I’m not a genius.”

“Sure you are.”

“Cerci?”

“Regulus?”

“More words please.”

She lets out a dramatic sigh, shoulders shrugging against the floor. “I don’t want to, like, touch anybody,” she grimaces. “Or, I do. I like hugs and high-fives and handshakes—“

“Who likes handshakes?” Regulus demands, genuinely affronted.

Cerci rolls her eyes but Regulus can see her holding back a smile. “I do, okay? Can I keep going?”

“Sorry, yeah, go on.”

“Thanks. So, like I was saying, I don’t want to touch anybody—um—sexually...I guess?”

Regulus considers that for a moment. “Not anybody?”

She shakes her head.

“Not anytime?”

Another no.

Unhelpfully, the only thing that comes to his mind is “huh” which he doesn’t think is a particularly adequate response.

“I thought it would like...happen when I got older, you know?” Cerci presses on when Regulus pauses for too long. “All my friends they’re always talking about the people they fancy and it’s not that I don’t fancy people exactly but I don’t....” she trails off.

“Want to have sex with them?” Regulus finishes for her.

She nods, seemingly grateful that she didn’t have to explain it again. “I don’t want the things my friends want.”

“What do you want?” Regulus asks, genuinely intrigued.

She chews on her bottom lip. “I think I want to fall in love. To be held. To be...I don’t know, to find someone who feels comfortable and safe.”

Regulus still isn’t sure he a hundred percent understands. “But you don’t want to have sex?”

She nods again.

“Do you—“ he pauses, worrying this might come across wrong but feeling he has to ask. “Do you think it’s possible you just haven’t...found the right person?”

She scoffs at the idea. “People want to have sex with the wrong people all the time,” which is certainly not a point that Regulus can argue with. “I don’t even want it in my head. I don’t even think about it. Merlin, that can’t be normal can it?” She looks at him with big pleading eyes and Regulus realizes, suddenly, that the question is not rhetorical.

“I don’t think normal really...means anything, when it comes to sex,” not that he’s the one to ask, Jesus Christ.

“But normal people want to have sex,” she pushes.

Regulus shrugs. “Abnormal people also want to have sex.” That gets a laugh out of her which is nice, Regulus doesn’t like seeing her too serious, it doesn’t feel right.

“I suppose that’s true,” she looks back up at the ceiling and lets out a heavy sigh.

He’s still watching her and after a moment he reaches out and squeezes her hand. “Hey,” he says softly, “what is it?”

“Nothing...it’s just...” she frowns. “Who’s ever going to want me like this?”

Regulus feels his brow furrow. “What do you mean “like this” you’re brilliant.”

“But who’ll ever want to waste their time on someone who doesn’t even want to have sex?”

Regulus is feeling, admittedly, a little out of his depths here, but he can tell how much this means to Cerci. How much she’s clearly been worrying about it, so he’ll do his best not to fuck it up.

“Someone who really cares about you, someone who deserves you, won’t ever feel like being with you is a waste of time, regardless of what you’re doing,” he says meaningfully.

The ghost of a voice runs through his mind.

I’m sorry.

it says,

I should have asked before I touched you.

Regulus’s heart stutters at the memory of James Potter, caring so much even after everything. James Potter who never made Regulus feel like a waste of time even when he couldn’t be normal.

“You think?” Cerci’s nervous voice brings him back to the present.

Regulus nods. “Absolutely.”

A small smile flickers across her face. “Hey, maybe we should just get married, huh?”

Regulus can’t help the laughter that bursts out of him.

“Hey!” she giggles, poking him in the side. “It’s a good idea! It would solve a lot of problems for the both of us.”

She’s not wrong. It would be incredibly convenient all things considered, and the Greengrass’s are a good enough family that his mother might actually consider it. For half a

heartbeat Regulus considers it himself. But then...

"You said you wanted to fall in love."

Cerci shrugs. "Yeah but, not very likely is it?"

That's not good enough for Regulus. Not nearly. "You deserve that Cerci, you deserve to be in love with someone and to have them be in love with you. I want that for you."

Her face softens and after a few seconds she leans over and gives him an innocent kiss on the cheek. "You're very sweet you know that?"

"If you say so."

She snorts, shaking her head. "Merlin, I can't believe I was ever afraid of you."

Regulus bites the inside of his cheek, holding back a smile. "Me either, if anything you're the scarier one out of the two of us."

"I KNOW!" she says with enough conviction that it shakes another laugh out of Regulus.

They go back to sitting in companionable silence, letting the distant voices and steps that fill the house wash over them.

"Have you ever been?" Cerci asks, seemingly out of nowhere, which probably means she's been thinking about it for a while.

"Have I ever been what?"

"In love."

Regulus's chest gives a mighty squeeze and for a good moment he isn't sure he'll be able to answer. Or breathe for that matter. He thinks about lying but decides against it. He doesn't want to. Not to Cerci.

"Yeah," his voice is rough and thin and he coughs to clear it out. "Yes," he says more firmly. "I have."

He can feel Cerci watching him but now he's the one looking away, eyes firmly on the ceiling.

"Are you still in love?" she's whispers, like it's a secret, which he supposes it is.

He takes a deep breath, closing his eyes on the exhale. "Yes."

"Reg—"

"OI BLACK!" Barty shouts up the staircase, startling Regulus into sitting up. "Send your girlfriend home, the meeting is about to start!"

He glares at the closed door like the other boy can see him. “Fucking Barty,” he grumbles, and then to Cerci; “Sorry about him, I’ve told him we were not together but he’s...well, a bit of prick honestly.”

Cerci smiles. “Nah it’s okay. Kind of funny really, considering,” she nods to the floor, like all the truths that just passed between them are still lying there.

They both get to their feet, Regulus making a considerable effort to straighten out his clothes and hair and Cerci making comparably none. Boo raises his head and Regulus gives him a small nod before waving his wand and vanishing him into a pale mist.

“Oh!” Cerci gasps suddenly. “Before I forget, I have your book!”

Regulus had almost forgotten. “Brilliant,” he says as she starts rummaging through her bag, dumping its vast and unexplainable contents onto Regulus’s bedroom floor.

“Is that a bird cage?” he asks, squinting at the pile of rubbish she apparently carries around in her bag.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” she looks up with a grin on her face. “It’s a fairy cage.” And before Regulus can even begin to try and come up with a response to that; “Aha!”

She holds up a black leather bound book, it has a thick spine and dark purple patterns carved into the cover. Cerci tosses it to him like it’s nothing but once it’s in Regulus’s hands it’s treated with reverence. Most books are. The letters on the front read: Secrets of the Darkest Art.

“Thank you,” he runs his hand over the embossed cover. Recently the Dark Lord has started making odd requests of Regulus, for vitality potions, the type of thing one might ask for if their magical core had recently been damaged. Except that if that had happened Voldemort would have been incapacitated and as far as Regulus can tell—and track—the Dark Lord is as mobile as ever, hopping around the country and abroad. That paired with his changes in appearance has peaked Regulus’s interest.

“My mum hates all that stuff, all the old family antiques and things,” Cerci is going on as she swings her bag over her shoulder. “She says it’s creepy, doesn’t match the decor, but obviously we can’t get rid of it,” she scrunches her face. “I think she tried once and dad threw a fit.”

Regulus lets out a small laugh, trying to imagine Walburga ever throwing away dark magical objects because they didn’t match the decor. The book in his hands contains information on some of the darkest magic possible. Regulus had been surprised that he couldn’t find it in the Black family library. He’s been pulling everything he can think of on spells that are strong enough to tamper with someone’s magical core. This one is the last on his list and as far as he can tell there are only two copies in existence: one at Hogwarts and one in the Greengrass family’s private collections.

“Really,” Regulus says, hiding the book under his mattress before following Cerci towards the stairs. “I appreciate it, I’ve been looking for that for ages.”

Cerci gives him a funny look. “Any reason in particular?” she asks.

Regulus shrugs. “Just trying to solve a puzzle.”

“Hmm,” she keeps looking at him. “Should I be worried? That’s a pretty scary book.”

Regulus almost laughs. “I don’t know if you’ve noticed,” he gestures to the dark stairwell, the looming faces of the Black family glaring down at them. “But most things in my life are scary.” He means it as a joke but it comes out sounding a little more strangled than he’d like and Cerci reaches out, hand circling his wrist as they stop on the last stair.

“You know I’m always here right? If you need anything?”

Regulus gives her a tight smile. “Yeah, I know.”

“Reggggiiiiieeee! Baby, darling, we’re waitinnnnnggggg,” comes Evan’s voice, Regulus looks over his shoulder to see his obnoxious friends standing by the dining room doors. He rolls his eyes but Cerci only laughs, leaning forward and kissing him on the cheek.

“We have a reputation to uphold don’t we?” she says with a wink. “I’ll see you next week Reg.”

“Yeah, see you.” He smiles at her as she heads for the door and then steels himself for the teasing that he is sure is about to ensue.

“That,” Evan says as he walks towards them, “was adorable.”

“Shagging right before a meeting is a bold move,” Barty adds. “Guess you don’t need much time huh?”

“Not much of a cuddler?”

“Need to work on your stamina.”

“Tell me, does Greengrass—“

“ALRIGHT, Jesus you two,” he gestures towards the doors behind them. “Lets go shall we?”

Barty shakes his head. “You’re such a tightwad Reg. Honestly, you’d think getting laid would relax you a little bit,” as if Barty is in any position to tell someone else they need to relax.

People are still standing around talking when they walk into the room, the Dark Lord predictably absent. Always wanting to make his entrance. They take their seats, thankfully this time Evan doesn’t force them to sit with Snape, though the other boy is there, looking as miserable as he always does these days.

Regulus can’t hold back the giant yawn that rips through him then.

“Wow, Greengrass really tuckered you out huh?”

“Don’t start Barty,” Regulus warns. The truth is, he still isn’t sleeping well. Still having nightmares. He’s started brewing some dreamless sleep for himself, it ought to be ready in the next few days and hopefully he’ll finally be able to get a full nights rest. “If you don’t want me making comments maybe don’t be so obvious about it,” Barty grumbles.

Regulus rolls his eyes but doesn’t bother continuing the conversation. He hasn’t got the energy for it.

Not even ten minutes later the doors open and everyone is suddenly rushing to their seats as the Dark Lord makes his way to the head of the table. Regulus scrutinizes his face, cataloguing details—the way his nose has subtly lost some of its shape, the dimming of the colour of his eyes, slight thinning of his hair. It’s as though he’s...diluted somehow. But what the hell kind of spell does that? Is he cursed? Poisoned?

“My friends,” the Dark Lord begins, smiling out at them. “There is joyous news to announce, this past week we were able to strike an incredible blow against Dumbledore’s cause.”

“Ooh goodie,” Evan whispers, but Regulus feels a wave of anxiety wash over him. He wasn’t aware of any plans to attack the other side, at least not anything important enough to warrant the glee currently flashing across Voldemort’s face.

It won’t be them,

he tries to calm himself down.

It won’t be James and Sirius, they aren’t important enough.

“Wilkes was able to gain Fleamont Potter’s trust,” Regulus’s whole body goes stiff. “He was invited behind the Potter’s wards and able to poison their food. As of yesterday it has officially been announced that Euphemia Potter is dead and her husband is expected to follow her shortly.”

There’s a roar of approval from the room. A few jokes made about Euphemia Potter’s beauty and speculated sexual history. About Fleamont Potter’s bookish nature. Regulus can’t hear any of it, he just keeps watching the Dark Lord, waiting for him to open his mouth again, praying the next words out of it aren’t; “and James Potter is also dead”.

“It is a job well done,” is what he actually says next, loosening the fear in Regulus’s chest ever so slightly. “The Potters were important figures in the resistance against us, many will fall without their guidance.”

Oh James.

Oh god James.

I’m so sorry.

I’m so fucking sorry.

He has the foolish desire to go to him. He doesn't know where James is living now but he does know where his parents house is and he imagines James will be there, at least eventually, to gather up their stuff if for no other reason.

Don't be stupid, his brain hisses back at him.

He has Sirius.

He has Lily Evans.

He doesn't need you.

"I think there's one more person deserving of some recognition my lord."

Regulus's focus snaps back to the present at the sound of Lucius's voice. He looks over at where he's sitting, close enough to touch the Dark Lord.

"Oh?" Voldemort asks. "And who else would you honour, Lucius?"

The blond man grins. "Regulus, of course, our little potioneer."

At first Regulus can't figure it out. Doesn't know why Lucius would say that. Even when the whole room seems to turn to him he still hasn't made the connection.

"Ah, of course," the Dark Lord says, eyes falling on Regulus who does his best not to flinch under the cold gaze. "There cannot be a poisoning without the poison. We are indebted to your skill as always Regulus Black."

"Here, here!" Evan cheers, as others begin to clap.

And that. Then. That's when he finally understands.

He brewed the poison.

The poison that killed Euphemia and Fleamont Potter.

He is responsible for this. Oh god he is responsible for this.

"Oi," Evan hisses under his breath as the meeting continues on. "Are you okay?"

No, Regulus wants to scream. No. No. No.

"Fine," he chokes out instead, sitting stock still as he feels the blood draining from his face. He's going to be sick. He's almost positive he's going to be sick.

Oh James.

Oh god James.

I'm so sorry.

I'm so fucking sorry.

PART IV REMUS

He walks along the quaint streets of Godric's Hollow. He's always felt a sense of comfort here, of calm, that he never felt in his actual home. Now though, there's a very insistent unease that's creeping under his skin, growing greater as he gets closer to the Potter's cottage—or maybe it's just James's cottage now? The thought makes him grimace as he slips through the front gate.

He knocks but no one answers, and after a few minutes he tries the handle—unlocked. He rolls his eyes. You'd think there wasn't a fucking war the way James carries on.

"Hello?" he calls out as he steps into the entranceway. None of the lights are on, his voice echoing through the empty rooms. For a moment he's frozen by the sight of the staircase. He knows that upstairs, in the master bedroom, the body of Euphemia Potter is lying on her bed, preserved by magic. The thought makes him shiver.

"James!" he calls out again, still receiving no answer. He forces himself to move from the front hall to the kitchen. "James?" that's when he notices the back door is ajar. Really, he should have guessed as much.

It's a beautiful day out, sunny and not too humid, something sweet about the air. He walks across the Potter's back garden towards the small Quidditch pitch Fleamont built for James when he was little. It only takes him a minute to spot him, high in the air, diving and twirling. It's been a while since he's been able to watch James fly and he feels something ache in his chest—for the dream that was taken away from his friend. Remus has never cared about Quidditch, but he's always loved watching his boys fly.

He doesn't call out, choosing instead to sit on the grass, shielding his eyes from the sun as he stares up into the sky. It's another twenty minutes before James finally touches down.

"I didn't know you were coming over," he says in lieu of hello, dismounting his broom and dropping down onto the grass beside Remus.

He shrugs. "I was in the neighbourhood."

James gives him a skeptical look.

"Well, I mean, I was at Hogwarts."

"That's not even remotely in the neighbourhood."

Another shrug. "Everything is in the neighbourhood when you can Apparate."

James snorts, looking out at the field in front of them, breathing heavy, dark hair plastered to his head with sweat. "Sirius send you?" he asks finally.

“And Lily,” they’re both busy with Order business; Lily still working on trying to track down the missing Order members, and Sirius...well...Sirius didn’t say. Remus expects that was out of spite.

James plays with the handle of his broom. “How is Sirius?” he asks eventually. “How’s he... dealing with...” he waves his hand in the air, words failing him. James looks tired.

“He’s...” something grows tight in Remus’s chest and he has no idea why. “He’s struggling I think. It’s hard for him.”

James nods. “They were his parents too,” there’s no bitterness, no jealousy, the only person who wanted Sirius to be adopted by the Potters more than Sirius himself was James. “He hasn’t said anything to me...about struggling.”

That doesn’t surprise Remus. “I think he feels guilty...like he doesn’t deserve to mourn them the way he is. Doesn’t deserve to feel it as much as he does. That’s just speculation though he isn’t...” the tightening increases, a vice grip around his lungs, “isn’t really saying anything to me either.”

James gives him a look. It’s a “can you blame him?” look, which Remus does not appreciate in the slightest.

“Don’t start,” he grumbles.

“I didn’t say anything.”

“Your face did.”

James lets out a dry laugh. “Well my face is a dirty liar, you know that.”

Remus rolls his eyes, pulling at the grass for a minute before forcing himself to continue, unable to let it go. He’s both desperate to talk about it and desperate to avoid it at the same time.

“What would you have done? If Dumbledore had made you swear not to tell anyone?” he looks up at his friend, sunlight reflecting off his glasses. “If he said it was for the safety of the Order. What would you have done?”

James takes his time answering, eyes thoughtful. Remus feels himself squirm under the attention.

“I’d have told Sirius.”

Remus scoffs. “You’d have told Lily—“

“No,” James corrects. “I would have told Sirius. Lily would be fine, I mean, she’d worry and all, but she wouldn’t eat herself alive. Wouldn’t think it was somehow her fault that I was gone. Wouldn’t think I’d choose never to come back to her.”

Remus looks away, his grass pulling growing a little more aggressive. “That doesn’t even make any sense. How could he possibly think it was his fault?” he asks, even though part of Remus knows that James is right.

“I don’t think a lot of what happened to him in that house made sense,” and then, like he’s read Remus’s mind. “But you don’t need me to tell you that. You know it. So the only thing I can think is—“ but he cuts himself off, causing Remus to look up again.

“What?”

James rolls his eyes. “Don’t bite my head off.”

“I’m not biting your head off just—what were you going to say?”

There’s a long pause before James eventually goes on. “The only reasons I can think of for you listening to Dumbledore—and don’t give me that following orders bullshit Remus, I know you too well, you’re as much a rule follower as I am—so either you really, honestly, don’t trust Sirius or...or you’re punishing him. Because you and I both know the easiest way to hurt Sirius Black is to leave him.”

Something drops from Remus’s chest into the pit of his stomach. He can’t speak at first, trying desperately to form words with his bone dry mouth. Mostly he just sits there staring at James, hating him a little for knowing him so well, hating himself for allowing this conversation to happen.

“What could I possibly be punishing him for?”

James lets out a put-upon sigh. “You know what.”

Remus makes a face. “That was years ago.”

“Oh so we’ve all forgotten it then?”

“I forgave him.”

“I think you tried. I think you’re still trying.”

Remus lets out a growl before getting to his feet and walking a few paces away, his back to James. He tries his best to breathe—in through the nose, out through the mouth. It’s close to the full moon and he can feel the wolf prowling beneath his skin. Desperate to tear something apart.

Eventually he manages to calm down enough to speak. “I love him, you know?”

“I know,” James says softly.

“I’ve only ever loved him,” Remus laughs humourlessly. “I don’t even know what love means if it isn’t Sirius Black.”

There’s a pause.

“I know,” James says again.

Remus closes his eyes for a second, trying not to choke on his words. “But he can be so fucking cruel when he wants to be. When he’s angry. When he’s hurt. I don’t even think he means it, he just...snaps.” Remus exhales. “I’m not trying to punish him. God I hope I’m not. But I—I am scared of him.”

“Moons—“

But he shakes his head. “I think Dumbledore is right, that we should keep what we know to ourselves, at least right now. Gives us fewer opportunities to make mistakes. To do things we don’t mean.” That was what Sirius had kept saying wasn’t it? After he’d taken the most sensitive part of Remus, the most vulnerable, the most painful, and served it up to Severus Snape on a silver platter as a joke.

I didn’t mean to hurt you Remus.

I didn’t mean it.

I didn’t mean it.

“So the lying is for his benefit then?” James’s voice drags him back to the present and Remus sends his friend a glare.

“I’m not lying.”

James makes a dissatisfied noise. “If you say so.”

“Are you honestly telling me that you don’t think there’s a world in which I tell him what I’m doing and then one day we have a row and he decides to go to the bloody Prophet with it, or take out a billboard, or whatever else he concocts in that mad head of his? Not thinking about the consequences. Not thinking about anything except how good a story he’s gonna get out of it. Not thinking period.”

James just stares at Remus for a minute. “For the record,” James says eventually, “he isn’t fifteen anymore.”

And Remus actually feels a little ashamed at that, flush creeping up his neck.

“But what I’m actually trying to tell you,” James goes on. “Is that everything is a risk Remus, just like Moody says. Every choice, every word, every person. Loving each other, trusting each other, today? In this world? Right now? It’s a risk. But we do it anyway. Because having the people we love around us, next to us, in our beds, is worth it.” He runs a hand through his already thoroughly distressed hair. “You have to decide what you’re willing to lose.”

Remus tenses at that. “I’m not going to lose him.” The thought sends such an ache through him that he has to say it again, just incase the universe didn’t hear him the first time; “I’m not going to lose him.”

James nods, not looking particularly surprised by this. "Then you're going to have to start taking some risks."

Remus isn't sure he's quite ready to accept that. Ready to face that fear. Not sure he has the energy to admit that to James either. After a few seconds he comes back to sit next to him on the grass.

"We weren't supposed to talk about me you know," he says eventually.

James arches his brow. "I didn't realize your visit had an agenda."

Remus holds his stare, knowing that there's probably a more delicate way to do this, but he's never been a particularly delicate person. "You have to bury her James."

His friend instantly turns away, jaw tightening. Remus waits for him to speak, the trees in the distance rustling as the warm breeze blows through, further disheveling James's hair. The signs of grief are scratched all over him. Pale face and bruised eyes and fingers that won't settle. Eventually, when the silence stretches on too long, Remus knocks his foot against James's.

"Prongs?" he nudges softly.

It takes a few more seconds, but eventually James looks back at him.

"You have to burry her."

"I don't actually," he says coldly.

Remus bites his lower lip, all he's done the past two days is think about this moment, think about what he wants to say to James. "It isn't fair," he nods back towards the house. "This isn't fair James, not to your mum, not to Sirius or anyone else who wants to mourn her, to say goodbye, to have closure. Not to you. I know that Lily and Sirius think you need to be dealt with gently but that's never been us."

"No," James agrees, and Remus is happy to be getting some participation out of him.

"So here's the truth; you're throwing a temper tantrum."

That manages to get a startled laugh out of him. "Merlin Remus."

"I know, I know how insensitive that sounds, really I do," he gives James an apologetic look. "I'm not telling you that you need to get over this and move on, I'm not telling you to stop being sad or angry or whatever else it is that you are. I'm just saying...that you have to burry her. Because she's dead," James flinches and Remus reaches out and grabs his arm, squeezing tight. "I'm sorry James, really I am, but you can't change that, you can't just stubborn her back to life by refusing to accept it."

He watches James swallow with great effort. "I don't want to accept it," he says honestly. "I don't want to move on. I don't want her to go away somewhere that I can't reach her," he blinks the wetness out of his eyes, voice small.

“I’m sorry,” Remus grimaces. “I’m so sorry. But you can’t fix this. I know that you want to but you can’t.”

There’s a moment of silence before James lets out a shaky exhale. “I miss them so much. I already miss them so much. How do you go through life missing people like this? Knowing it’ll never go away? Never stop?”

Remus thinks briefly of his own mum. Of her smiling in the kitchen, baking, singing. “You just do,” he says eventually, which is not exactly an inspiring piece of wisdom but it’s true nonetheless. There’s no choice. It’s keep going or give up. And Remus isn’t sure James is even capable of the second option.

James pulls his knees in, letting his head drop, face hiding behind his hair. Remus can feel the small tremors going through him, knows that he’s crying. Lets him. His hand migrates to James’s back, moving in slow circles. He hopes that one day they find out who did this. Who’s responsible. So he can tear every bone from their body with his fucking teeth.

After some amount of time James finally lifts his head, scrubbing quickly at his eyes, like he’s embarrassed, though Remus doesn’t know why.

“Stay for dinner?” he finally asks, voice a little thick but steadier than Remus would have expected.

Remus wrinkles his nose. “I don’t know, are you cooking?”

James laughs, a little bit more sincerely than he has the whole time Remus has been there. “No, take-away, obviously.” He gives Remus a small smile.

“Yeah okay, can’t stay too late though.”

James arches his brow. “You got big plans Moony?”

Remus’s smile grows tight. “Something like that.”

PART V SIRIUS

He’s tired.

He’s so fucking tired.

The stairs up to the flat feel fucking mountainous and all he keeps thinking about is dragging Remus to bed and curling around him, feeding off his warmth and his smell and the feel of his skin against his mouth.

“Rem?” he calls out when he shuts the door behind him. Remus’s mug is sitting on the table in the living room, the couch a mess of blankets. “Remus?” he tosses his keys into the bowl by the door and tears his boots off, too lazy to unlace them all the way.

He's planning to go to the hospital tomorrow with James to spend some time with Fleamont. Then maybe go out after, get James some fresh air, give him something to do other than stare at his parents' dying or dead faces. The thought bites and scratches and tears on the way down.

He really is fucking tired.

"Remus?" there's no one in the bedroom, bed unmade, clothes on the floor—Sirius's. He sighs as he heads back towards the kitchen. Remus must still be at James's. Sirius thinks about just going to sleep but quickly dismisses the idea. If James needs people around than Sirius wants to be there. Wants to help.

He pours himself a glass of water and leans against the counter. He'll take a quick shower and then—

His brain stutters to a stop at the sight of a piece of parchment on the kitchen table. It could be anything really, Sirius doesn't know why his first reaction is dread. Is suspicion. But the sight of it makes his stomach churn.

He places his glass in the sink and takes a cautious step forward. And then another one. And another one. Until he's standing over it, reading the words with a shaking breath. He must go over it at least three times before actually touching it. Actually picking it up and admitting it's real.

I'm sorry.

it says.

I'll come back. I promise I'll come back.

That's all there is. Not that there needs to be more for Sirius to understand that Remus has left again. Left to do something somewhere that he won't tell any of them about.

He'll be gone for the full moon—if it's another week long disappearance Remus will be gone for the full moon. Fear overtakes Sirius's anger for a moment. Because who's going to look out for him? Who's going to make sure he's okay? Who's going to bring him chocolate and tend to his wounds and make sure he doesn't hurt himself too badly?

It's been years since they were separated on the full moon.

Not since they were kids really. If you ignore those months in fifth year, after Snape...and Sirius usually tries to.

But then.

Remus chose this.

And there's the anger again.

He reads the letter one more time before incendio-ing it. Walking to the bedroom and slamming the door. He doesn't bother getting undressed, just crawls under the covers and wraps them around himself, pretending it doesn't make him want to die that everything smells like Remus.

Chapter End Notes

HAPPY HOLIDAYS!!!!!!!!!!!!!! (Or if you're not celebrating anything right now Happy Sunday)

I feel like there were so many good friendship moments in this chapter and that makes me happy.

Also fun fact, if you're sitting there thinking "where the heck is Mary Macdonald?" you're in luck, she's in the next chapter a lot (at least currently) sooo that's something to look forward to!

Thank you all so much for the comments and kudos etc. even as this fic has gotten a little more popular everyone has still been really nice and kind which I'm pretty sure isn't how the internet is supposed to work, so thank you for, y'know, being your lovely selves!!

Chapter 46

Chapter Summary

Tequila rarely leads to good life choices

Chapter Notes

TW: Drinking

CW/TW: Sexual content (ok I'm keeping the rating M for now cause that still feels accurate to me but if you follow me on tumblr you'll know I had a whole existential crisis about this, so if you think it should be changed to explicit let your girl know!)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

PART I JAMES

A month after his wife, Fleamont Potter dies.

James isn't there when it happens. Though he supposes at this point it doesn't really matter. That's what he tells himself anyway. They send him an owl, inform him that he needs to make arrangements for the body. In some ways, it's a relief. They've already been talking about his dad like he's dead, at least now they don't have to feel guilty about it.

James has only just brought his father home when he receives a summons from Dumbledore.

"You don't have to go," Lily says, as she reads the letter over his shoulder. "Write him back—or hell, I'll go. Tell him to fuck off."

James snorts. "As much as I appreciate the offer, I think I'd rather have something to do."

She nods, giving him a soft smile and squeezing his arm. "Pizza and butterbeer for dinner?"

James groans. "Merlin, yes. Have I ever told you I love you?"

"Once or twice."

He kisses her then, one hand on the back of her neck, tilting her head up, her mouth warm and solid beneath his. "Good," he murmurs against her, "because I do."

They've unofficially moved into to his parents house, at least for the time being. James knows it's been hard for Lily. Knows it isn't ideal. But she's still here, unshakable. A force of nature.

"Go on then," she says when they pull apart, giving his bum a smack. "Go see what the old man wants."

James laughs. It helps, acting normal. Helps them both forget about the bodies upstairs.

Dumbledore has opened the Floo in his office so James is able to go directly to the castle instead of walking up from Hogsmeade. The old man is waiting for him, standing by the large window on the far wall, hands clasped behind his back. He smiles when he sees James, gesturing him into the chair in front of his desk.

"It's good to see you," Dumbledore says, once they're sitting across from one another. James doesn't have a response for that, but it doesn't appear that Dumbledore needs one. "Have you changed your mind on the matter of your parents' funerals?"

James grits his teeth. "They'll happen as soon as Remus is back."

"Ah," Dumbledore nods sagely, not bothering to add anymore.

James arches his brow, voice sharp. "Any idea when that might be?"

There's a twinkle in Dumbledore's blue eyes. "I'm afraid I can't say."

James expected as much. It still pisses him off though.

"You wanted to see me?" he asks when the silence begins to drag, his knee bouncing impatiently up and down.

Dumbledore nods. "I did. We have it on good authority that Voldemort is going to be bringing some of his supporters from Bulgaria across the boarder in a weeks time. Very skilled and dangerous supporters. I intend to stop him."

James stares blankly back at him. "Okay?" he says eventually. "And you want me to...help?"

Dumbledore smiles. "On the contrary, I want you to lead the mission."

That takes James by surprise, Moody usually insists that only trained Aurors are given leadership roles. "Er, why me?"

"It's our belief that the group will be flying over."

It takes a minute for James to catch up. "On brooms?"

"Precisely."

"That..." he shakes his head, running a hand through his hair. "That's bloody mental. That's a multi-hour flight."

“Indeed,” there’s that twinkle again, “but seeing as the sky is the most difficult mode of transportation to monitor and control, I believe they think that it is the option that will give them the best chance of avoiding an ambush.”

It still sounds absurd to James, but he supposes he and Voldemort aren’t usually on the same wavelength so perhaps that makes sense.

“Why me though?” he asks again, which actually has Dumbledore chuckling.

“And I was under the impression that you had a rather large ego. James, you are an exceptional flyer. The best in the Order, even better than the Aurors, though you’ll not hear Moody say that aloud.”

“Frank—“

“Ah,” Dumbledore smiles. “Yes well, Frank Longbottom was an excellent captain I think you and I can agree on that. But I’m afraid he can’t hold a candle to your flying. A fact he would freely admit himself if you asked.”

Deep down James knows that’s true, though he’ll never be able to see Frank as being anything but aspirational. On and off the pitch.

“Okay,” he nods eventually. “Okay, I’ll do it. But I want Sirius with me.”

There’s the slight sharpening of Dumbledore’s expression. “Sirius has his own assignments.”

But James shakes his head. “No Sirius, no me. That’s nonnegotiable.”

The two men hold one another’s gazes for a long moment, neither flinching or looking away. Eventually though, Dumbledore does concede.

“Very well, you’ll be allowed at least three other people, if not four. Do you have any other —“

“Frank, Alice, Marlene,” James lists off before Dumbledore has even finished the question. “And Mary.”

The old man arches his brow. “Mary Macdonald?” he asks.

James nods.

“She’s not a member of the Order.”

“I know,” James says without much concern. There’s another pause before Dumbledore inclines his head in James’s direction.

“Very well, if you can get her to agree I don’t see why she can’t accompany you,” and then, a little wryly; “A Gryffindor team reunion.”

James hadn't realized it, but he supposes it is what he's doing isn't it? He shrugs, "Best flyers I've ever met."

Dumbledore is smiling again. "Indeed."

James feels the finality of that answer, rising to his feet. "Are we done?"

Dumbledore gestures to the fireplace. "We are. Alastor and I will be in contact with you shortly to iron out the details."

James stares at the fireplace for a minute, feeling his chest tighten. He's not quite ready to go back yet. To that house. To everything in it. All the grief he still has to face. Eventually he shakes his head, taking a step back.

"I think I'll go for a walk actually," he nods towards the office doors. "It's been a while since I've been to Hogsmeade."

There's the flicker of surprise on Dumbledore's face but he quickly wipes it away. "Well then, by all means."

James doesn't bother with much more of a goodbye. It isn't that he doesn't like Dumbledore exactly. He doesn't agree with him always, but James knows that none of them would be here if it wasn't for him. Knows that Dumbledore is the backbone of the resistance and that as hard as all of them try it's nothing compared to him. James is, in many ways, grateful for Dumbledore. It's just that he always leaves James uneasy and he can never quite pinpoint why.

It's the end of the summer holidays, nearly September, but there are no children in the school yet. So James takes his time, walking leisurely through the familiar halls. There's a deep aching nostalgia that settles itself in the pit of his stomach. His memories like bruises. They'd been happy here. They'd been other things too of course, but he thinks above all, when it comes down to it, they'd been happy.

It happens by accident really. He means to be making his way towards the front doors. He doesn't know how he ends up on the seventh floor. Ends up in front of a wall that barely needs any prompting at all, as if it still remembers him after all this time, producing a familiar looking door out of thin air.

For a moment, just a moment, James considers walking away. But of course he doesn't. He never could. His breath hitches when he steps through, like stepping back in time. Everything is the same—the bed, the furniture, the painting on the ceiling. It even smells the same.

"Fuck," he says shakily. These memories are more than a bruise.

He forces himself to walk further inside, eyes and hands greedy to touch everything. It's overwhelming. And he can't help but wonder if the last time anyone was in this room was the day Regulus showed him his Mark. He wonders if it's been sitting here all this time, waiting. If it's missed them.

He reaches the back wall, places his palms flat on the stone and drops his head. Trying to breathe. Trying to understand what the hell he's doing. He loves Lily. He loves her. So where do all these other...feelings fit? This painful need. To have him. To hold him. To keep him safe.

He remembers Regulus, sleep mussed and sitting in the middle of the bed, smiling.

I might even be happy,

he'd said.

If you can believe it.

James's nails curl against the cold stone. He never did tell his dad about Regulus. It hadn't felt important before. He isn't sure why it feels important now. James tries to clear his head, tries to focus on the things he needs to do, tries to make lists. Get himself together enough to walk back out that door. But it doesn't work. His brain a mess of black curls and hesitant smiles and love. So much love.

"Fuck," he hisses again, pulling back and slamming his palms into the wall. Pain vibrates all along his forearms, the mirror next to him shaking before it crashes to the floor.

"Shit," James steps back as broken pieces scatter across his shoes, the golden frame laying face down. "Shit," he repeats, having absolutely no idea how you're supposed to fix things in an enchanted room. He bends down, carefully lifting up the nearly empty frame, a few more pieces sliding off and crashing onto the floor. He tries to run through all the domestic spells he knows, tries to figure out if any of them are any use in this situation, and that's when his eyes find the now bare wall in front of him.

That's when he sees the carvings.

He places the broken mirror back on the floor and steps forward. There, carved into the wall, are initials:

G & S

James traces them with his finger before his hand trails down to the second set of letters, carved just beneath:

J & R

The second carving is slightly rougher, but still clear, and James's finger follows the twists and curves as he tries to make sense of it. Tries to convince himself that it's just a coincidence. Because it couldn't have been Reg could it? When would he have done it? Why wouldn't he have said anything? Was it...was it after? Did he come back after all of it was over and carve them into the walls?

James flattens his palm over the letters, like he's trying to press them into his skin. Like he's trying to force a hole in space and time and go back to when they were written. He knows what they mean of course. Knows what this is.

It's an I love you.

Reg never said it back that last time.

He carved them into stone but he couldn't say it.

Not when James was walking away.

The same way Sirius had walked away.

I love you.

James pulls his hand back from the wall and starts moving. He has to. There's nothing in this room but heartbreak, he doesn't know why he came here. This is the last fucking thing he needs. He just wants to go home to Lily and curl up on the couch and eat pizza and drink butterbeer and pretend that things are getting better. And pretend that he doesn't still feel as raw and lost as he did on the day he walked into that kitchen and found his mum slumped over the table.

He wants to be happy loving the things he has.

Because it's killing him to want the things he doesn't.

PART II REGULUS

The problem with Dreamless Sleep, is it only helps when you're not awake. These days Regulus's nightmares don't stay under his bed. Though he supposes, depending on who you ask, maybe they never did. Maybe they always had faces and voices and hands. In any case, Regulus is nothing if not a problem solver.

He's started playing around with different potions—the endorphins of Amortentia, the high of Pain Potions, the peace of Calming Draughts. He hasn't gotten the mix right just yet, but he thinks he's close. Then maybe he'll be able to get them all to shut up. The ghosts in his head. In his chest. In the corners of his house. Two had been enough to keep him up at night. But four is driving him insane.

He's been closing off Grimmauld Place, bit by bit. He suggested to the Dark Lord that meetings be held elsewhere, for the sake of maintaining the integrity of his potions, of course. There's a new paranoia that Dumbledore may have gotten himself his own 'source' and Regulus expressed his fear that someone might be tampering with his lab. It was a flimsy excuse but he received no push back, especially not once Lucius offered up Malfoy Manner. Always so happy to be of service. To make himself important.

Walburga was furious of course. As was Bellatrix. They yelled through the Floo. They sent howlers. They showed up and threw pots and vases and curses. But it's no matter. Walburga isn't coming back from Scotland and Bellatrix's claim on the house does not supersede Regulus's. So the unofficial Death Eater headquarters have moved and Regulus has started

tightening up his wards. He can't keep out his family of course, as much as he might want to. But there are no more strangers walking around.

The house is much quieter now.

Most days that's good.

Some days it feels like suffocating.

The potions he's currently brewing aren't complicated enough to hold Regulus's attention—to keep his mind from wandering. He's taken some Calming Draught but it isn't powerful enough and his homemade concoction still isn't ready. After his third lap around the house he grabs his cloak and Apparates to the first place he can think of. Which turns out to be Diagon Alley.

It's nearly September, which always makes him think of school, of coming here with Kreacher and picking out his books and gear. He expects that's why he thought of it. And true to form the streets are filled with families—with children whose eyes are nearly too big for their faces as they stare through shop windows, ogling sweets and racing brooms and potential new pets. It makes Regulus feel ancient.

He's only eighteen.

He keeps the hood of his cloak up, doesn't draw attention to himself, mostly stays out of the shops. He spots one or two Aurors lurking about but they don't seem to notice him. He knows they're only the tip of the iceberg, that Moody has this place locked down tight. This was a bad idea. Of all the places to go, he decided on the one place where he's most likely to cause a scene. It isn't that he's technically "wanted" but technicalities are a funny thing these days, and he knows that if the Aurors catch sight of him they'll do their best to find a way to drag him in for questioning.

He wonders if James would come, if he got arrested. If he would sit across some intimidating table and drill him with questions while dumping Veritaserum down his throat. Or if he'd drag him away to safety. The war be damned.

It's a pathetic thought.

But he has a lot of those.

Daydreams about James Potter. He thanks Merlin every day he's as good at Occlumency as he is.

The sun is out, peeking at them from behind the clouds that intermittently pass overhead. Regulus pauses near the end of the street where the crowds are thinner, tilting his head back ever so slightly and feeling the warm light brush his skin. He doesn't go out much these days. Can't even remember the last time he flew. The thought makes something in his stomach ache.

He sighs, dropping his head back down and getting ready to turn towards the Leaky Cauldron again, when something catches his eye—long black hair, a leather jacket, a scowling face. Regulus's whole body reacts to the sight of Sirius walking away down the street, like an electric shock has just been sent through him.

It's been ages since he saw his brother.

Years.

Which shouldn't matter really. Not in the grand scheme of things. It certainly shouldn't change the direction Regulus is heading in. And yet, inexplicably, he feels himself moving forward, following after. He seems to be on a roll today, where poor decision making is concerned.

They turn off the main street, Regulus keeping a good distance between them and Sirius apparently not bothering to check behind himself. Typical. It's not until he sees his brother heading for the side door of a shop that he realizes he's about to lose him. Which is good, this has been going on long enough, he's lucky Sirius is such an unobservant idiot that he hasn't found him out already. Now he can watch him disappear inside and head back home where he should have stayed all along.

"Sirius?"

Oh goddamnit.

Sirius turns around infuriatingly leisurely, like they aren't in the middle of a war where people are murdered and kidnapped on the daily. Like he isn't an obvious target given his position in the Order and the galling nature of his betrayal of the Black family. He doesn't look like someone who is being eaten alive by fear or anxiety. He doesn't even have the fucking curtesy to look surprised when he sees Regulus, his eyes running the younger boy up and down before arching his brow.

"Well look who the fuck it is," he says eventually, leaning back against the door he was about to walk through and crossing his arms over his chest—the opposite in every way to a prepared, defensive stance.

"What the hell are you doing?" Regulus can't help blurting out. "I could be here to attack you you fucking idiot."

This too, does not appear to sway Sirius. "Your wands not out."

"I—well—it, I might—you don't—what if there were other people, what if I'm the distraction!" he says flustered.

Sirius's brow remains arched. "Are there other people?"

"That's not the point!"

"It feels like the point."

“Jesus Christ Sirius, how you aren’t dead yet is a fucking mystery.”

That manages to pull something vaguely resembling a smile out of his older brother, though Regulus has no idea why. “You always were such a worrier.”

Regulus scowls. “I’m not a worrier, I’m just rational.”

“Uh-huh,” his eyes run Regulus over again, it’s an uncanny move that reminds Regulus of their mother, the way she can make you feel so small with just a look. “So what the hell are you doing here Reg?”

Regulus opens and closes his mouth, finding he has no answer for that question. So he decides to change the subject. “What the hell are you doing here?” he demands instead.

At first he thinks Sirius isn’t going to answer but then: “I live here.”

Which Regulus wasn’t expecting. “Oh,” and then, before he can stop himself. “I thought you lived with—” he cuts himself off.

Sirius only waits about half a second before he decides to finish the sentence for him. “With James?” he asks, Regulus neither confirms nor denies that that was what he was going to say. “No. Not since school. He lives with Lily.”

“Evans?” Regulus hates the way that feels coming out of his mouth.

“Yeah,” Sirius says, laughing slightly, as though it’s ridiculous to think that there could be any other Lily on the planet.

“Oh,” Regulus fully intends to leave the conversation there, and yet; “They’re together then?” It isn’t that he hadn’t suspected, only it feels different to know. To have it confirmed.

Sirius considers him for a moment before nodding.

“Have they—since...” Regulus fidgets. Merlin this is ridiculous, he can’t even believe they’re having this conversation. He needs to go, he needs to get out of here.

“Not until the end of our seventh year,” Sirius says, surprisingly kindly. “It took him a long time to...you know.”

Except Regulus doesn’t know, but he desperately wants to. Wants to know if James talked about him and what he said and how fucking painful it was for him because Regulus spent most of that first year without James feeling sick all the time.

Luckily, however, he does appear to have some self-restraint left, because all he says is;

“Right.”

There’s a moment of tense silence before Sirius pushes himself off the wall. He steps forward and Regulus eyes him warily.

“I expect you know,” Sirius says, a new weight in his voice. Regulus is about to ask what exactly it is he’s expected to know when suddenly he realizes—a wave a nausea washing over him.

“You mean about the Potters?” he asks, hoping his voice isn’t straining too much.

Sirius nods sharply, eyes intense. “Who did it Reg? Tell me who fucking did it.” There’s an edge that wasn’t there before but that feels familiar, an anger. And it hits Regulus that his brother has been behaving suspiciously politely.

“You wanted information,” he says out loud, more to himself than to Sirius. He should have known that was the only thing that would keep Sirius from ripping his head off. Honestly, it’s a miracle that neither of them has drawn their wand yet.

“Just tell me this one thing, just this once have a fucking spine.”

“Fuck you,” even if Sirius does have a point.

“Forget me, think about James huh? You want me to believe you really gave a shit about him? Tell me who killed his parents.”

“Fuck. You.”

Regulus is shaking and it’s only partially from anger. Because he could tell Sirius the truth, could tell him it was Wilke’s who played the Potters. He could even tell him what department he works for at the Ministry. Except that maybe they would find him. And maybe they would talk to him before cutting him into pieces or flaying him open or doing whatever else it is they intend to do. And maybe he would let slip that it was Regulus who brewed the poison. Ice cold fear shoots through him and he takes a stumbling step backwards.

“Don’t,” Sirius warns, now letting all facades fall away. “Don’t you fucking dare try to run away. They were murdered, they were murdered by some cowards too afraid to face them. That’s whose fucking side you’re on. A bunch of weak backed Purebloods who can’t even look the people they’re about to kill in the eye,” he gives Regulus a disgusted look. “But then, I guess that’s why you’ve always fit in with them so well huh?”

Regulus turns on his heel while he still can, desperate to get away.

“Stupify!” he hears Sirius shout behind him, but he swerves to the side, listening as the spell bounces off the cobblestone as he rounds the corner onto the busier street. He’s shoving people out of his way, hood falling back, causing far more of a scene than he ever wanted to. He knows Sirius won’t try to curse him again, not in the crowd, but that doesn’t mean—

“DEATH EATER!” he hears his brother’s voice carrying through the street, bouncing off the buildings, he winces, still pushing forward. “Death Eater! Get him—Sampson fucking get him!”

Regulus is going to assume Sampson is one of the Aurors he saw earlier. Or maybe one of the Aurors he didn’t see. Either way he doesn’t look for him, doesn’t check behind him to see

where Sirius is. There are spells placed on high traffic areas like this, that prevent Wizards from being able to just Apparate wherever they choose—there would be too many collisions—other wise he would have done so already. But he can see one of the Apparation points just up ahead.

“Stop him! Don’t let him through, fucking—“

Regulus gasps as he stumbles out of the crowd and into the designated Apparating zone, air flying from his lungs as he throws himself into the spell, ripping himself away from the street. His brother’s voice a fading noise in the background.

PART III SIRIUS

He doesn’t tell James about Regulus. James already has enough to deal with and Sirius doesn’t feel like opening up old wounds. Plus, in general, he likes to think as little as possible about what happened between his brother and his best mate.

They’re meeting in the Hog’s Head tonight. Dingy pub run by Dumbledore’s brother, who is technically in the Order but who never seems to be around. Either way, he agreed to close down early tonight so that James could bring them together for this bloody mission he’s been given. Not that Sirius is complaining really, it’s the most interesting thing he’s had to do in weeks, and he needs a distraction. Remus has been gone more than twice as long as he was last time. Sirius has no idea if he’s okay or when he’s coming back and it’s started to drive him a little barmy. It’s not helped by the fact that James refuses to burry his parents until Remus gets back. Just adds to the list of things he’s pissed at Remus for.

“Do we know what kind of brooms they’ll be riding?” Frank asks about two hours into the meeting. As far as Sirius is concerned all the important details have already been hashed out and the rest is boring semantics.

If Remus was here—which he wouldn’t be anyway because the bastard can’t even fly—but if he was here, right about now he’d be fighting back a smile because he’d know that Sirius was getting ready to jump out of his skin with impatience. And he’d be enjoying every minute of it. Of course he’d also make up some excuse to get them out early, and start laughing at Sirius the minute they left the room. Sometimes, when Remus laughs really hard he snorts and Sirius absolutely does not find it endearing.

Anyway. None of that matters. Because Remus isn’t here.

“I think we can expect their brooms will be high-end,” James says. “The Purebloods in Bulgaria aren’t lacking in Galleons, and neither are our lot.”

Frank nods, “Some of the new domestic models have cloaking features on them. That might be a problem for us.”

“Cloaking features?”

“To help prevent any nosy Muggle neighbours from seeing you,” Alice explains. “It’s pretty low-level invisibility and camouflage but, they won’t have to worry about casting those spells themselves.”

James bites his lower lip, clearly thinking. “Okay, worth keeping in mind. I’ll see if I can get my hands on one of those, take a look at what they’re all about.”

Great,

Sirius thinks.

Lets all go home now.

“Any word on how many we’re expecting?” Frank asks, and Sirius barely holds back a groan.

They’ll never have an exact number, there’s no way for them to get that information, surely Frank is aware of that?

“Dumbledore’s best guess is five at the least and ten at the most,” James says. “But that is just a guess, technically we have no idea.”

They never bloody do these days.

“So glad he only gave us enough people to handle the lowest possible number,” Mary says flatly, and Sirius fails to hold back a snort.

“Aw come on Macdonald,” James says good-naturedly, like their back in the Quidditch locker room. “You really think you can only handle one Death Eater? I always figured you for more of a multitasker than that.”

Mary rolls her eyes, giving James the middle finger, but she doesn’t push the issue.

“Okay great,” James claps his hands together. “Anymore questions?”

There better fucking not be.

“Actually I was wondering—“

Sirius thinks he should be commended for the fact that he simply decides to tune Frank out for the next thirty minutes and not murder him. Sirius couldn’t tell you what the hell he was asking but somehow he continues to come up with questions until eventually even James has had enough.

“I think we better wrap up,” he runs a hand through his disheveled hair.

“I second that motion!” Sirius says quickly.

“Me too,” Marlene yawns, sliding out of the booth. “I’m knackered. Got guard duty tomorrow morning too.”

Everyone is nodding in similar states of exhaustions except for Frank. This is the problem with having a nerd on your team. I mean, arguably Remus is a nerd, but he's more of an aloof sarcastic nerd and less of a bug-the-teacher-for-extra-coursework kind of nerd.

"I still think we should go over—"

"Darling," Alice drawls as she shoves him out of his chair and onto his feet. "If you ever want to get laid again you'll stop talking now."

Sirius snorts, sidling up to James at the front of the table as their friends start making their way outside.

"Good meeting captain," he says, knocking James with his elbow. James rolls his eyes.

"Not a captain anymore."

"Says the man who just brought the Gryffindor Quidditch team back together."

"You sound like Dumbledore."

"Wise beyond my years?"

"Pretty sure he's wise well within his years."

Sirius laughs as he watches James finish packing up his notes, slipping them into the messenger bag he swings over his shoulder.

"Hey, stay for a drink yeah?" Sirius says, in a voice that he hopes sounds casual and not at all desperate. "Open bar and all that," he nods to said bar just over James's shoulder.

His friend arches his brow. "Aberforth give you permission to drink his booze did he?"

"Well, he didn't explicitly tell me not to," Sirius shoots him a grin. "Which is basically the same thing."

James smiles back at him but it doesn't quite reach his eyes. "Listen Pads," he rubs the back of his neck. "I'm just kind of...I'm a little tired can we—"

"Yeah, 'course," Sirius cuts him off quickly. He knows that it isn't a rejection. Knows that James really is fucking tired. But for some reason it still burns like one. "Another time yeah?"

James reaches over and squeezes his arm in thanks. "Yeah, after we kick some Death Eater ass in a few days."

"Damn straight," Sirius hopes his good cheer is believable. It must be at least a little bit because James goes, leaving Sirius alone in the empty pub. He should really go home himself, he knows that, but, quite frankly, he hates being home these days. And there's a fully stacked bar just sitting in front of him, ripe for the taking.

He's only just started pouring his first drink when Mary comes strutting out from the back, scaring the living daylights out of him.

"What the fuck Macdonald!" he shouts, spilling tequila all down his front. "Were you hiding back there or something?" He pulls out his wand and vanishes the mess.

"What? No," she says, not bothering to hide the fact that she's laughing at him. "I went to the bathroom."

"There's a bathroom in this place?" Sirius asks, looking around and feeling certain that any bathroom in a pub like this is one he has no desire to visit.

"You've been here how many times?" Mary asks, stepping up to the bar. "How did you not know there was a bathroom?"

Sirius shrugs, pouring himself a new drink. "Dunno, never looked I guess. Always just go outside," he nods his head towards the door.

Mary wrinkles her nose in distaste. "Jesus, men really are dogs aren't they?"

Sirius bites his lower lip, holding back a smile. "You have no idea."

He grabs a new glass and holds it up. "Drink?" he asks.

Mary seems to debate with herself for a minute before giving up. "Fuck it," she says, sliding onto the barstool across from him. "Why not."

"That's the spirit," Sirius grins as he gives her a generous pour, sliding the glass across the bar top. "So, haven't seen you around much lately."

He's leaning forward, resting on his elbows as he waits for her answer.

Mary only shrugs. "Yes, well, you lot are all busy saving the world and I'm off to an office job every morning so—our paths aren't exactly crossing."

"Where are you working again?" Sirius asks, taking a good gulp of his drink. It tastes awful—leave it to Aberforth to get the bottom shelf shite—still though, it doesn't stop him from drinking more.

"Interning at a Muggle paper, it's not bad."

"A Muggle paper? Damn, you've really forsaken us huh?"

She gives him a smirk. "I did get an offer from the Prophet believe it or not."

Sirius nearly chokes on his drink. "No shit," he shudders. "Better off taking the Mark than working for that lot."

Mary laughs. "Yeah, that's about what I thought too. Anyway," she plays with the condensation her glass has left behind on the bar. "I don't mind my job. It's kind of nice,

being away from all this. Though I do worry about you lot.”

“You worry about me the most though right?” Sirius asks, batting his eyelashes at her.

When Mary answers it’s with far more sincerity than he’s expecting. Than he wants. “Probably, yeah.” Mary’s stare is unblinking, and Sirius finds himself pulling away from it. She always did see too much of him.

“You don’t need to,” his voice has lost some of its mischief. “I’m fine.”

“Fine? Really? Wow Black, you’re so convincing.”

He glares at her. “Fuck you. Not all of us get to just run away and pretend this isn’t happening.”

Mary is unfazed. “I’m not running and I’m not pretending. I’m just not interested in being Dumbledore’s little bitch.”

Despite himself, Sirius laughs. “Listen, I’m not exactly a fan of the old man either but we need him. He’s smart and he’s powerful and—“ Sirius’s throat grows unexpectedly tight. “And we’re kinda struggling out here, in case you haven’t noticed.”

Mary watches him calmly. “I’ve noticed.”

“From your cushy office job,” Sirius can’t help but jab back.

“When I’m needed I’m here,” she answers easily. “James asks for help I help. The same way I do when Lily asks. Or Marlene, or you—if you need me Sirius? You let me know, okay? I’m here for you always. But I’m nobody’s bloody foot soldier.”

Sirius has always loved Mary. Always envied her. Envied the confidence she has. The confidence he’s always trying to convince everyone comes naturally to him. After a few seconds he lifts his glass, holding it out to her. “I’ll drink to that.”

“You say that like you won’t drink to anything,” though she meets his glass all the same.

“Touché,” he says, before throwing the rest of his drink down his throat. Pretending he doesn’t see the concern sneaking into Mary’s eyes at the way he doesn’t even flinch when it goes down.

Eventually Sirius ends up beside her, the bottle of tequila between them. At some point they stopped using their glasses or chaser and started just taking sips. Mary has been regaling him for the better part of an hour with her office gossip. You would think it would be less enthralling considering he doesn’t know any of the people involved but Mary is a very good story teller and Sirius is entirely hooked on the apparent love triangle that has been brewing around something called a “water cooler”?

“Is this even allowed,” Sirius makes a large wave-y motion with his hand.

Mary arches her brow, she's acting more sober but the colour in her cheeks gives her away. "Is what even allowed? Trish shagging Jared? I mean, it's not advised but I'm fairly certain there's no law against it."

"No, no—I mean, yes—but no. The whole," more hand waving. "Sleeping with your coworkers thing, isn't that like," gosh his wrists are getting tired. "Against the rules or something?"

Mary seems amused by this. "Well, well, look at you, Sirius Black, concerned about rules all of the sudden. I think Remus is rubbing off on you."

Sirius pointedly ignores that last comment and the horrible things it does to his stomach. "I never said people should follow them, I was just wondering if this was on the down low because Jared is a dickhead or because there was some actual wrong doing occurring."

Mary shrugs. "No official rule. Not that I know of anyway. And I've gotten with at least three of the boys at the office."

Sirius lets out a low whistle. "Look at you, shagging Muggles left and right."

Mary snorts, reaching for the bottle and taking a sip before she speaks again. "Not sure I could go back to Wizards if I'm being honest," she says, wiping her mouth off on the back of her hand. "They're far too conservative in bed."

Sirius makes several very distressed noises, ranging from shocked to outraged. "Conservative! As if."

Mary shrugs, trying and failing to conceal her smile. "Just calling it as I see it. Or...feel it in this case."

"Well clearly you aren't sleeping with the right wizards."

Mary gives him a pointed look and due to alcohol consumption it takes Sirius far too long to figure out why.

"Oh come on," he throws his arms up in exasperation. "You can't judge a bloke on what he was like at fifteen!"

"I'm not judging, you were very sweet," she says mockingly.

"Fuck you."

"And...virginal."

"Oh please," Sirius rolls his eyes. "You weren't any more experienced than I was."

There's a short pause in which Sirius becomes aware of how close they've shifted together, Mary's eyes intent on his.

"No," she says eventually. "I wasn't."

Something has shifted in the air between them and Sirius knows he should pull away, except that...it feels like ages since anyone's touched him, and he doesn't even mean sexually. He's never had a very cuddly family life of course, but the Potter's always somehow managed to fill that gap, with their easy comfort and affection—Fleamont swinging his arm over Sirius's shoulders, Euphemia hugging him and peppering him with kisses.

They're gone now though. And Remus is gone. And James is—well—James is dealing with things the best he can. And Sirius understands, he does, it's just that he's so fucking lonely.

"Sirius..." Mary says warningly, but he only hears it distantly, barely registering it in some vague part of the back of his mind. And then, somehow, he's moving forward and their mouths come together. It's terrible and twisted and not at all how it's supposed to be. But at the same time Sirius can't help but think that this is the closest thing to home he's had since he found that fucking note on the kitchen table.

Mary kisses him back, but she's also the one who pulls away first. The cold air hitting Sirius's face only a second before Mary's open palm.

"Fuck," Sirius says before he can stop himself, it's a hard enough hit that even the alcohol can't dull the ache.

"That," Mary says evenly, "was for Remus."

Before Sirius has the chance to respond she delivers another jaw cracking blow.

"Christ Mary," he spits on the floor of the pub, half-expecting to see one of his teeth on the ground.

"That," she goes on when he's finally managed to pull himself upright again, "was for me."

Sirius can't help but feel bitter that the alcohol that was enough to make him think snogging Mary was a real ace idea, is not strong enough to stop the shame currently crawling up from his stomach or the ache currently spreading across his jaw.

"Sorry," he finally manages, voice tight.

"You don't get to use me just because you and your boyfriend are having problems."

"We're not having problems," Sirius snaps back—an automatic response.

Mary stares at him in disbelief for a few seconds before shaking her head. "Merlin Sirius, you really are a mess aren't you?"

He huffs out something that might be a laugh. "A bit." And then the real weight of what he's just done hits him and he groans, folding his arms over the bar and burying his head.

"Fuck," he hisses into his sleeve. "Fuck, fuck, fuck." He stays like that, curled in on himself, wishing he wasn't such a colossal asshole, for about ten minutes before Mary starts kicking him under the bar.

“Okay enough, come on, lets go, time for bed,” and then, as if realizing what she’s just said. “Separately. Very separately.”

Sirius snorts, lifting his head—which feels like it weighs about a hundred pounds at this point—and scrubbing at his face.

“I don’t know what’s wrong with me,” he mutters as Mary vanishes the empty tequila bottle and summons two glasses of water.

“You’re lucky you’re so pathetic or I’d be much angrier right now,” she shoves the water at him. “Drink.”

He does. Though he honestly thinks he could use just a little more alcohol. Just enough to stop the hurting.

“He’s gonna leave me,” fuck he must be drunker than he thought. The words come out just as whinny as they sound in his head.

Mary scoffs. “Alright drama queen, it was one drunken kiss. You don’t even have to tell him if you’re that worried, it’s not like I will.”

But Sirius only shakes his head, making the room spin. “No not cause—not because of this,” he half slurs, causing Mary to tap on his water. He dutifully takes another drink.

“Sirius,” Mary says wearily, “that boy is in love with you, he’s not going anywhere.”

Sirius actually giggles at that. It’s giggle or cry. “He’s already gone though.”

She rolls her eyes. “Doesn’t count if he’s coming back.”

“You don’t think?” the bitterness clear in his voice. “Feels like it counts.”

There’s a pause in which Sirius takes it on himself to drink his water unprompted. If he doesn’t start getting a little more sober he’s going to have to take the fucking Knight bus home.

“And here I thought you two weren’t having problems,” Mary says finally. Sirius snorts. “Look,” she goes on. “He’s doing his best I reckon, just like the rest of us.”

But Sirius isn’t having it. “Nah I don’t think so. I’ve seen Remus’s best, this isn’t it.”

“Sirius—“

“I should go,” he gets up, too tired and too drunk for this conversation. Or maybe too sober. He can’t really tell anymore. “Listen, Mary,” he says as he shoves his arms into his leather jacket, it’s not really cold enough out for it but he’s been wearing it anyway. A layer of armour. “I really am...I really am fucking sorry I...” he doesn’t know what else to say. He knows that’s inadequate—knows he’s been fucking inadequate this entire conversation but he’s not sure he can manage anything else at the moment.

After a brief pause Mary nods her head. “Just don’t do it again.”

“Won’t. Promise.”

“And I’m not apologizing for slapping you.”

He manages a smile at that one. “I wouldn’t expect you to.”

“How’re you getting home Sirius?” she asks with a level of concern that is uncharacteristic for her. Sirius hates it.

“Knight Bus,” he lies. “But I think I’m gonna walk for a bit first, clear my head.”

“Alone?”

He swallows with difficulty.

“Yeah.”

She looks like she might argue with him but eventually just rolls her eyes. “Well fine, I guess. Go be a bloody idiot, but I swear to God if you fall into some river and drown or get hit by a car I will resurrect you just so I can kill you myself. Understood?”

Sirius nods, mustering a grin. “Understood.”

“Goodbye then, prick.”

“Bye,” he’s at the door when he turns back, in time to see Mary refilling her water glass.

“Hey Mary?”

“Hm?” she looks up.

He chews on his bottom lip for a minute before eventually getting himself to speak. “Come around more yeah? We miss you.”

He doesn’t wait for a response. Pushing out into the night.

It’s three days later that he wakes up to the smell of bacon frying. He lies in bed for a minute and wonders if maybe he’s having a stroke or if maybe he’s had a stroke and gone and died. But eventually he wakes up enough to know that more plausible than sudden pre-mature death, is the possibility that someone in his flat is actually cooking bacon.

He’s not sure he prefers that.

Eventually, he does actually drag himself out of bed, shuffling down the hall with one sock half slipping off and nothing on but a t-shirt and a plaid pair of boxers. When he gets to the doorway of the kitchen Remus has his back to him, his blond hair damp—just showered—

wearing a sweater that drips off his shoulders, exposing his collarbone in a way that usually drives Sirius mad.

He stands there for a long time—longer than is socially acceptable—just watching as Remus moves about, making breakfast, like he hasn't been gone for nearly a month. Like everything is normal.

“Oh shit!” Remus lets out a nervous laugh when he catches sight of Sirius. “You’re up.” He smiles, stepping forward and kissing Sirius quickly on the cheek, not making eye contact before turning back to his cooking.

“Sit, I’ve made food. A full breakfast.” There’s a falsely cheerful tone to his voice, at odds with the new angry scar cutting down his face from his temple to his jaw. Judging by the way he’s moving around the kitchen he’s dealing with other far less superficially wounds.

Eventually Sirius manages to force himself to move, taking a seat at the table and trying to swallow the bile working its way up the back of his throat. This is what they’re doing then. Pretending these gaps in their relationship don’t exist. It sounds frighteningly similar to something Remus’s mother would have done, though he doesn’t suspect the other boy would appreciate the comparison so Sirius bites his tongue. See? He is maturing.

“I picked up this recipe ages ago—I think Lily gave it to me, she’s a brilliant cook you know? James is well spoiled. Especially considering he can’t make a boiled egg without setting something on fire. Though I suppose you and he have that in common,” he throws Sirius a wink over his shoulder. He’s speaking too quickly, voice too high—almost manic—desperately making sure there’s no air left in the room, no space for Sirius to dredge up all the things he clearly doesn’t want to talk about.

“I think I’m going to try cooking more, I always liked it as a kid. I mean, that was more baking, mum was really a baker more than she was a chef, still though. I like it. It’s calming. Plus, I like feeding people. It feels...intimate I guess? Like a way of telling people you love them without actually having to say it.”

Remus throws the empty skillet in the sink, grabbing two loaded plates off the counter and coming to sit across from Sirius.

“Bon appétit,” he says, mispronouncing the words horribly. Sirius takes great joy in listening to Remus butcher the French language, if only because he knows his parents would be clawing at their ears if they could hear him.

Remus really did go all out; bacon, eggs, fried bread, potatoes—Sirius doesn’t eat any of it, isn’t sure he could manage it at the moment, but he can certainly appreciate the lengths that Remus has gone to to see this denial through.

“I went to this little grocers a few blocks over,” Remus is looking at his own breakfast and not at Sirius as he prattles animatedly on. Sirius doesn’t miss the way his hands are shaking as they lift his fork to his mouth. “It was amazing, really, we should go there more often. The produce was way better than the place we normally get it.”

Under normal circumstances Sirius would laugh at that statement. They live largely off of takeaways and food items that come in various boxes and cans, vegetables are not a staple in either of their diets.

“Did I mention I’m thinking of taking up cooking? I should probably get some books huh? I feel like that’s always a good place to start.”

Sirius feels like something is crawling all over the top of his skin. Tiny legs running down his spine, along his sides, into the crook of his neck and the caverns of his ears. He wants to tear them off. Wants to cut the skin from his bones.

“Well go on, eat up, it’s good I swear.”

He just wants him to stop.

Stop acting like this.

Stop pretending.

“I kissed Mary.”

Remus freezes across the table, forkful of egg halted on its way to his mouth. There it is then. The fiction shattered. Sirius has never been good with fragile things.

The silence continues, Remus eventually dropping his hand but still not looking up. There are people in the streets outside, there are owls and shop door bells and the sounds of the wind whipping between the buildings. All of that starts to feel unbearably loud in the wake of Remus’s stillness.

“Why?” when the question comes it’s small. It carves itself a home in Sirius’s chest where he expects it will live for quite some time.

“I—“ his voice fails him. He just wants Remus to be able to feel it—feel the ache that has been building inside him since the first time he left. How it’s there, always, sometimes quiet and sometimes loud but never gone. How it stays even when Remus comes home. How it’s eating him alive.

“I just wanted to be wanted,” he manages eventually. Which isn’t even the half of it. But is also maybe the most honest way he can answer.

Remus laughs bitterly but Sirius prefers it to the overly false cheer of earlier. Better to be something real, even if it hurts.

“Poor Sirius, nobody around to fuck him, what a hardship for you.”

Sirius tries and fails not to flinch. “That isn’t what I meant.”

“Isn’t it?”

“You’re not being fair.”

“Fair,” when Remus’s eyes meet Sirius’s they are all sharpened points and bleeding wounds. “You snog someone else and I’m the one not being fair?” Sirius doesn’t know what to say to that so he says nothing, watching Remus struggle with where to go from here.

“Just a kiss?” he asks finally.

Sirius nods. “She slapped me, if you can believe it.”

There is no trace of humour in Remus’s face. “So she stopped it?” he asks, voice struggling to remain even.

“Yeah,” Sirius says slowly. “Yeah she stopped it.”

He watches Remus take that in. “Would you—“ his voice chokes itself. “Would you have gone further?” he manages after a few tries. “If she hadn’t?” desperate. Pleading.

There are a dozen ways Sirius could answer this. A dozen ways he could hurt Remus less. He can pretend he chooses the truth because it’s the right thing to do. But ultimately he thinks he does it out of spite.

“Probably, if she had let me. I didn’t exactly have a plan but...”

“I see,” there’s that laugh again—cold and empty. He gets up out of his seat and walks over to the counter, bracing himself against it. “I don’t know what I’m supposed to do with that.”

“Yeah, I know how that feels.”

“Oh you are not seriously comparing what you did to what I—what I have to do. Do you have any idea what I’ve been through the last few weeks and you—“

“No,” Sirius cuts him off. “No I don’t Remus. I have no idea what you’ve been through, why don’t you share with the class?”

Remus glares at him. “That’s not fair.”

“What’s that?” Sirius cups his hand over his ear. “No? Nothing to share? Okay, how about I go huh? For starters, Fleamont died—“

“What?” Remus’s face falls but Sirius pushes forward.

“And James has been sitting around waiting to burry his parents because he doesn’t want to do it without you. Which has been jolly good fun for all of us let me tell you. I’ve been stuck in this fucking flat, alone, with barely anything to do because Dumbledore thinks I’m a goddamn liability. I haven’t heard the case against me but I’m sure it’s a good one if he’s got you on his side.”

“Dumbledore doesn’t think—“

“Really? Is that why he told you not to tell me where the fuck you keep disappearing to?”

Remus sighs, scrubbing at his face. “None of us are supposed to be telling each other where we are.”

“And you think James and Lily are following that rule huh?” Sirius asks bitterly. “Or Alice and Frank? Marlene and Dorcas? You think they’re keeping secrets from each other?”

“Well they should be—“

“They’re together Remus. They’re in relationships. That’s what you do in relationships, you tell each other things.”

“Like how you snogged your ex-girlfriend? Those kinds of things?” Remus shoots back, but Sirius is too wound up to be cowed.

“At least I’m not a fucking liar.”

“No,” Remus sneers, “just a cheater.”

“It was a kiss Remus grow up.”

“It was a kiss because she stopped you you absolute asshole. Did you even want to or did you just do it so you could throw it in my face?”

Sirius isn’t sure he knows the answer to that question, though he’s almost positive neither of those options are the right one. He’d wanted to. He’d wanted Mary, because of everything she was and everything she meant and all the things she tasted of. Childhood and safety and four poster beds all squashed together under one roof. Back when he always knew where Remus was. And James. And Peter.

“What did Dumbledore tell you, really?”

Remus throws his arms up in the air in exasperation. “Let it go Sirius.”

“No, I want to know what he said that made you so convinced you can’t tell me where you’re going!” his voice cracks. “What the fuck did he say?”

“Nothing!” Remus finally shouts back, the word mutilated, like he barely allows it passed his mouth, teeth carving into it on the way out. “He didn’t have to say anything.”

Didn’t have to say anything.

Didn’t have to.

Of course. Because who knows better than Remus Lupin what a betrayer Sirius Black can be.

Sirius’s chair screeches as he pushes back from the table and heads out of the room.

“Where are you going?” Remus calls after him, panic clear in his voice.

“Bed,” is all Sirius says, before slamming the door to the bedroom closed behind him.

He curls up under the blankets, curtains drawn, lights off, and squeezes his eyes shut. He could keep fighting, he has it in him, he's a Black after all. But he's tired of saying terrible things. Tired of hearing them. Sometimes he feels the echoes of his mother in his voice and it makes him want to scrape out the inside of his skin. He just wants Remus to go away again. He likes himself better when he doesn't have anyone around to bite.

It might be minutes or hours but eventually the door opens and closes and Sirius feels the mattress dip. He doesn't look up, doesn't unfurl from his ball. Remus sighs, his hand coming tentatively to run through Sirius's hair. When Sirius doesn't pull away his movements become more sure of themselves, fingers dragging across his skull.

"I hate this," Remus says finally.

Sirius only hums in response.

There's a pause before Remus speaks again. "I want you," he almost whispers.

Sirius finally pulls himself properly out of the covers, looking up to find Remus's eyes already on him. The sight of him makes something trip in Sirius's chest. It always does. Remus Lupin is a work of art. He deserves to be carved out of marble and placed on the palace steps. Deserves to be studied and admired and remembered for generations to come. One day you will find him in a museum and people will travel from all around the world to see him and they will say;

This.

This is what it looks like.

To be made of magic.

Of daydreams.

Of love in all its colours.

This is Remus John Lupin.

"I want you," Remus says again, voice sneaking beneath the blankets and kissing Sirius's skin. "I want you."

For a moment the past and the present blur, and Sirius can see two boys in their school dormitory. Together. Finally. After waiting for so long.

I want you.

"Then have me," he croaks, stealing Remus's line.

He hears the other boy's breath catch and in the next second they're crashing together, desperate in a way that has nothing to do with bodies or heat and everything to do with the wounds they're both nursing. Both constantly tearing open.

They're clumsy as they push the blankets aside, Remus straddling Sirius's hips as Sirius runs his hands up Remus's sides, feeling like he might die from the sudden overwhelming sensation of having the only thing he's ever wanted.

Remus pulls off his own shirt, revealing a map of cuts and bruises and ribs that are too close to the surface. Sirius makes sure to keep his touches gentle—reverent. They kiss with their teeth. Sirius lifts up and Remus pushes him back down, hands running along Sirius's arms until he has him pinned by the wrists.

"I want you," Remus murmurs as he trails kisses along the underside of Sirius's jaw, along his neck, his shoulders. "I want you."

Sirius can't help bucking up, can't help whining in agreement. His life is empty when Remus is gone. His body is cold. His bed is too big. It is terrifying to know that someone can walk away and take so much of you with them. That without realizing it you have been cutting pieces of yourself away.

"What do you want?" Remus asks, breath hot against the skin of Sirius's stomach. He doesn't remember losing his shirt. Doesn't know how it happened or which one of them did it.

"You know what I want."

Remus looks up at him for a moment, cheeks flushed, lips spit-slick and bitten raw. "Yeah," he says hoarsely. "Yeah okay."

It isn't until later. When they are as close as it is possible to be. When Remus is filling him up and all Sirius can feel or smell or taste is him, that Sirius really embarrasses himself.

"Don't leave," he pants—whines—not "harder", or "faster," or "more baby more", but; "Please don't leave." He thinks it's possible that there are tears escaping his eyes, rolling silently down the sides of his face. But he tries not to think about it.

Remus falters above him, concern washing over him. "Sirius—"

"No don't," Sirius huffs, out of breath as he digs his heel into Remus's lower back, urging him on. "Don't stop. Please don't stop."

Remus looks like he's trying to figure something out. Sirius isn't sure if he manages it but he moans in relief when Remus finally starts moving again. When he brings them back together, opening Sirius's lips and forcing his way inside.

Sirius is too hot, his skin too tight, everything dissolving into nothing but feeling.

Have me,

he thinks, as he comes apart in Remus's arms.

Have me.

Have me.

Have me.

I'm yours anyway.

Chapter End Notes

Hello beautiful people!

I honestly thought I wrote this chapter so fast, I was like "wow it's been like two days since the last update, look at me go" imagine my surprise when I realized that it has actually been a week since Christmas.

My grasp on time is so loose you guys. So loose.

ANYWAY! I hope this was worth the wait, still pretty overwhelmed by how nice everyone has been about this fic, I know it's not perfect so I appreciate how forgiving you are of the mistakes that slip through! Happy 2022 people, it can't get worse right? I mean...right?

Chapter 47

Chapter Notes

tw violence

tw blood

tw vague reference to sexual assault

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

PART I JAMES

His parent's funerals are held two days after Remus gets back. People fill the Potter's home, they line up down the street. They bring flowers and food and alcohol. They bring pictures. Of his mother as a little girl. Of his father after selling his first potion. Of the pair of them dancing at their wedding and smiling at the camera.

Lily stands on one side of him and Sirius on the other. Remus is there. Peter. Mary, Marlene, Dorcas, Alice, Frank. They build walls around him. They stand guard. Never leaving his side. It's an endless and brutal day. Maybe he's supposed to take comfort in it. In how many people loved his parents. How many lives they touched. Maybe he's supposed to think that they're in a better place. That he'll see them again. But he doesn't. He spends the whole day feeling their absence like stones in his chest. He spends the night trying to figure out how he's ever going to fill the gigantic hole they've left behind.

Naively, James thinks that burying both his parents will be the worst part of his week.

It is not.

"We should do our best to capture as many of them as we can," Frank is saying as he pulls on his flying gloves. "Information is what we need right now." His voice is steady, he doesn't sound nervous, or like he's barking orders, merely advising.

"But surely we don't need all of them for information," Sirius is twirling his broom lazily in his right hand like a baton. It's hard to see him through the night, what with his black leather jacket, jeans and boots. His hair is pulled back in a bun so at least his face is clear.

"No," Frank admits reluctantly, "we don't need all of them."

Sirius grins, teeth catching in the moonlight. "Well then, lets go kill some motherfuckers."

Frank's mouth forms a thin line. "Careful Sirius," he says, after pausing for a minute. "You're starting to sound just like them."

"Good thing I'm on your side then, isn't it Frankie boy?" he winks, throwing a leg over his broom and pushing off the ground.

Frank watches him go before turning his unimpressed look on James who rolls his eyes. "He's showboating," James takes his own broom in hand. "It's just to hide how nervous he is."

Frank doesn't look convinced. "Is he going to be a liability out there?"

That irks James. "Has he ever been a liability in the sky?"

"Do you really want me to answer that?"

"Yes," James's stare meets Frank's and doesn't waver. "He may not have always listened to what you said, but he never once made a choice that didn't end up getting us the goal."

He can see Frank clench his teeth, knows he's unhappy that he can't come up with an example to prove James wrong. They might have fucked around but neither James nor Sirius ever took winning lightly.

"This isn't Quidditch," Frank says finally.

"And Sirius isn't a liability," James matches his tone.

"What're you boys talking about?" Alice calls out as her, Mary and Marlene start making their way over.

James holds Frank's gaze for another beat before tearing his eyes away. "Nothing. Time to go. You guys ready?"

"Where's Sirius?" Mary asks as the other two nod.

James gestures upwards. "Already flying," he mounts his broom. "Stay in formation yeah? Don't break, at least not until the fighting starts. We wanna have prisoners at the end of this not bodies," he shoots Frank a look and the other boy dips his head in thanks. "They're no use to us if they're all dead."

"Aye, aye Captain!" Alice calls out.

Rolling his eyes, James kicks off into the sky. Almost immediately Sirius is at his side, maybe two arms width away and slightly behind. They're flying in something of a pyramid formation, James in the lead, with Sirius and Mary on the second line and Alice, Frank and Marlene making up the base. It's dark and cloudy out, the air heavy with unspilt rain. And the wind is cold even though it's barely September.

They've traveled south, waiting a few miles inland from the Channel. According to Moody's sources overseas this is the route the Death Eaters are taking—last spotted flying over

Dieppe.

“Strange,” Frank had said when they got the news. “I thought they were trying to avoid an ambush, why’re they being so obvious about it?”

That hadn’t sat particularly well with James either but Moody and Dumbledore held firm that the mission should continue. So here they are. It is some comfort that according to the reports there are only four flyers. Outnumbering the Death Eaters is really the best outcome they can hope for.

James flexes his hands on his broom, eyes peeled as they search the skies. There is every chance that the two groups will pass one another and never know it, especially in this weather. In many ways this mission is a bit of a hail Mary pass. The hope that maybe, if the timing is right, if the stars align and luck is on their side, they can stop this before anymore Death Eaters get the chance to step down on English soil.

They move swiftly through the clouds, the night sky coming in and out of view. It’s disorienting, like being intermittently dropped into the thickest fog you can imagine. Sometimes he’ll even lose sight of Sirius and Mary in his periphery. For a moment James wonders if it’s a spell, if Voldemort has grown powerful enough to control the weather, but he quickly banishes that thought. That’s exactly how they want you to think—James has seen the pamphlets, heard the speeches—the way Voldemort’s followers talk about him like some greater being. Above them all. Untouchable. James doesn’t buy it. He reckons if you pricked him he’d still bleed red, just like the rest of them.

“James, to the west,” Mary says sharply, voice somehow remaining quiet even while cutting through the wind.

He instantly follows her directions and, sure enough, there are four dark robed figures pulling out of the clouds and heading right for them, like the horsemen of the apocalypse.

“Everyone ready?” James asks, to general agreement. “Good. Lets make this as clean and fast as possible alright?” He slides his wand into one hand, steering with the other as they start moving towards their targets.

James isn’t sure what to expect, isn’t sure if the Death Eaters will try to run first or just stand their ground. But as the two groups move closer and closer together neither dithers. James’s nerves are going haywire but he doesn’t fight them, instead he tries to grab hold of that feeling, tries to use it, just like he’s always done in Quidditch. Adrenaline is your friend, even when it tastes like fear.

When they get close enough both groups stop, floating in the air facing one another, lit only by the moon when it manages to get in front of the clouds. James suddenly feels like he’s taking part in some old-timey duel.

The man who appears to be leading the Death Eaters smiles, using all his teeth. “We’ve been waiting for you,” he says, which James thinks is not at all foreboding.

“You should have said something, we would have come sooner, I do hate being rude,” James quips back, which only causes the other man to smile wider. He’s dressed in black, with long curling locks of brown hair spilling over his shoulders.

When he doesn’t speak again James clears his throat, the realization of how unprepared he is for this dawning on him bit by bit. “Listen, the way I see it, this goes one of two ways.”

The other man’s smile does not diminish. “Oh?” he asks, tilting his head to the side, it’s a sharp and unnatural motion. James does his best not to let it shake him.

“You can make this easy on yourselves, come back with us to the Ministry, answer a few questions, and then turn around and go home.”

One of the Death Eaters snickers at that, and James tightens his grip on his wand, gritting his teeth.

“Or?” the leader prods, voice dancing with amusement.

“Or,” James pushes on, “you can try to fight us, in which case, some of you will die and the rest of you will still be brought in for questioning and then locked in a cell for the Dementors to snack on,” Azkaban is a bit of a hollow threat at this point seeing as the Death Eaters have more or less been running the place for years, but he’s not sure if these men know that. He’s hoping they don’t.

Their leader appraises him for a moment before he speaks. “You think we will be so easy to defeat?” he asks, accent thick.

“You’re outnumbered,” James says simply.

“Ah,” the man seems delighted by this. “My apologies, but I fear you are mistaken.”

Something heavy drops into the pit of James’s stomach and he resists the urge to start looking around for more flyers, that would only make him seem weak. So he keeps his eyes steadily on the man in front of him.

“Don’t think I am,” he says smoothly. “Not unless they count differently in Bulgaria.”

The man actually laughs, the noise echoing sinisterly into the night. “No, no, I believe we count the same,” he points to the person next to him. “One,” to himself, “two”, and to the empty space on his other side, “three.”

It is then that the air shimmers, the familiar sight of a charm being thrown off. A fifth flyer appears. And then behind him a sixth. A seventh. A tenth. A fifteenth...

“Holy shit,” he hears Marlene curse behind him.

Suddenly Frank is at his side, breaking formation. “How many do you count?” he whispers quickly to James, whose eyes are still bouncing over all the materializing bodies, some of whom appear to be wearing full masks, others with their faces bare like the original four.

“I-I don’t know,” James swallows to get the shakiness out of his voice. “Thirty?”

Frank nods. “At least, we should have known—“

“Like hell we should have,” that’s Alice, James doesn’t look for her, doesn’t tear his eyes away from the army in front of him. “All the sources said it was a small group, I saw the reports my goddamn self.”

“Well clearly they were wrong,” Frank replies flatly.

“Listen,” the man with the long brown hair calls out to them, eyes dancing with amusement, “the way I see it, this goes one of two ways,” that garners him a few laughs from his cohort.

“Oh brilliant,” James says through clenched teeth, “he’s a stand-up comedian.”

“Our lord is not a cruel man,” the Bulgarian leader goes on.

“The hell he isn’t,” Mary hisses beside James.

“He offers you all the chance to join him and his noble cause to return the Wizarding race to its proper place atop the Great Chain of Being, rulers over all, the natural kings of the earth.”

“Oh fuck me,” James can hear the eye roll in Mary’s voice.

The man before them smiles, it seems to be his go to expression, though truthfully, James has never seen a smile that held so many threats.

“So the question is, what will you do James Potter?”

At this point James is barely even surprised to learn that they really had been expecting them, not just expecting someone, but them specifically. That would be the spy’s work, he imagines. Fucker.

“James?” Frank asks, he doesn’t sound afraid or pleading, just curious.

James wishes for a minute that he was better at Legilimency. It’s not as though he can say everything he wants to when the people ready to tear them to shreds are all staring at them, waiting, listening. But then, they’re Quidditch players. They can read each other better than anyone else. He meets each of their eyes and knows that they all understand. Eventually Frank gives him a little nod and James turns back to their captive audience.

“Well,” he says, squaring his shoulders, wand in his hand, mind already casting. “I think we’re gonna kill some motherfuckers.”

James fires off two spells before he’s even finished talking, the others doing the same, breaking off in different directions. James drops into a feint, feeling the returning fire wizzing over his head as the cold night air bites his cheeks. One of the Death Eaters tries to follow him, but a feint is no beginner’s move and the man loses his grip, tumbling off his broom and down to the ground without James even having to lift a finger.

It's then that he fully appreciates why Dumbledore asked him to do this. It's been so long since he's flown with people who aren't players, he'd forgotten how awkward they are in the sky. Even now as he dodges attacks left and right, he sees them struggling to keep their balance, to steer with only one hand.

James fires curses over his shoulder, keeping his flight patterns erratic, never staying in a straight line—not that that's hard, seeing as he's flying over and around Death Eaters while they fumble to get their wands aimed.

“James!”

He looks up to see Sirius a few feet above him with his own tail of pursuers.

“Bailey Switch!”

The Bailey Switch is a Quidditch move that Frank would be bloody embarrassed they're pulling, but James nods anyway.

He makes a big swerve to the right, Sirius mirroring him to the left. Both of them increasing their speed as they circle around and head right for one another. If you were watching from above it might look as though they were making a sort of heart shape, their pursuers following behind.

The idea of the Bailey Switch, is that if two players on the same team are being trailed, they can orchestrate a collision. Flying towards one another at top speed and then ducking out of the way before the people behind them can react, causing them to run into one another.

In general, most players know to look out for this, it's a fairly obvious move, and as long as you're paying attention you're unlikely to miss that the person you're flying behind is heading straight for their teammate. But these guys are not Quidditch players.

Sirius and James run right towards each other, James almost pressing his chest to his broom handle he's going so fast, the men behind him speeding up as well. Even in the dark he can see the grin on Sirius's face as they get closer and closer. A game of chicken.

One.

James thinks, wind whipping the hair away from his face, the first few light drops of rain, splattering his glasses, hinting at the coming storm.

Two.

They're close now. Any sane person would have ducked out already.

Three.

They both veer suddenly, and without warning, in opposite directions and almost instantly James hears the sounds of colliding flyers behind him, foreign curses filling up the night—screams—as the men knock each other from their brooms.

“THATS WHAT I’M TALKING ABOUT BABYYY!” Sirius shouts, shooting off a few spells into the chaos of the collision.

James actually laughs. It’s been so long since he’s flown—properly flown, not just done lonely laps around his parents back garden. And flying with Sirius has always been different. They fit together, their connection never more obvious than when they’re in the sky, moving in sync, anticipating one another’s needs.

It’s the sound of clapping that makes James jerk his broom around to find the Bulgarian leader floating behind him.

“Very nice. You two are good at tricks yes?” he’s still smiling, something undeniably sharp about it. “But you fight like children.”

James answers with his wand, the man in front of him barely dodging the spell, but laughing all the same, returning it with one of his own. They circle around each other, firing off magic at rapid speeds. They’re parrying like they’re fighting with swords not spells, moving backwards and forwards, wrists and hands slicing through the air like blades. It’s strange, James finds, duelling someone who speaks a different language, spells coming at him that he doesn’t recognize and has never heard.

For all the complicated magic he throws out, all the training and years of study he’s had, the spell that finally manages to sneak under the Bulgarian’s defences, is nothing but a simple:

“Expelliarmus!”

He’s barely even thinking when he says it, just knows he needs to return his opponent’s fire with something. But somehow, it’s the right moment, the right aim, sliding under the man’s shields and knocking his wand off into the night. For a moment both of them seem surprised, staring after it, frozen.

And then James aims his wand again, the Bulgarian’s eyes coming back to meet his. It’s James’s turn to smile.

“Got you,” he says grinning.

James will never know why it catches his attention. The loud indistinct noise behind him. There are lots of noises, have been this whole time. So what it is about this one that has James looking over his shoulder at the exact moment he shouldn’t be, he doesn’t know.

But he does.

Look.

And what he sees is a riderless broom, suspended for a moment in the night sky.

And what he sees is Sirius falling.

There’s no thinking after that.

He dives after Sirius who is too goddamn far and falling too goddamn fast.

Behind him he thinks he hears the word “weak” spat in his direction but he doesn’t care.

James tries to use his wand to slow Sirius’s fall but his aim is off, everything happening so quickly. He’s played Quidditch his whole life, he knows how you catch people—you get under them. Grabbing people from above leads to injuries. And he’s trying, he’s really fucking trying but he isn’t going to make it, they’re too close to the ground. So the minute he can, he just reaches. One hand on his broom handle and the other grabbing for Sirius’s arm.

He stretches so far it hurts but it isn’t enough.

He can’t reach.

There’s too much distance and the ground is gaining on them.

James tries again, nearly swinging off his broom, hand groping around in the air until he’s finally able to latch onto Sirius’s arm. He feels a sickening give that he knows isn’t right. That he knows is very, very wrong. Something is tearing.

It’s Sirius.

James realizes with a horrified jolt.

Sirius is tearing.

He lets go of his broom completely, grabbing the front of Sirius’s jacket so that he can stop pulling on what is almost certainly a dislocated arm. His stomach drops as he’s dragged upside down on his broom, only holding on by his legs as they continue to spiral towards the ground way too fast.

“C’mon,” he hisses, sounding scared even to himself as he tries to pull up his own body weight as well as Sirius’s. He needs to get upright again, needs to slow them down. He uses all his core strength but it’s hard—in fact it feels impossible. Which it can’t be. James doesn’t have the luxury of impossible right now. Pain shoots through his back and shoulders as he forces his body to do what it almost certainly wouldn’t be able to without the copious amounts of adrenaline pumping through him.

With Sirius half draped over the front of his broom James gets himself sloppily upright, nearly falling off as he scrambles to pull up the handle so they don’t plummet to the ground. It’s still a rough landing, James’s legs buckling underneath him as they hit the earth too hard and he crumbles forward, Sirius in his arms.

“Fuck—Sirius?” he’s breathing heavy, hands shaking as he runs over his friend’s body. But he can’t find any injuries other than his arm. “Sirius?” he demands again, voice high and tinny. Sirius’s eyes are closed, his face slack, body too stiff. James didn’t see what happened. Didn’t hear the spell, he doesn’t know what’s wrong. He just knows Sirius isn’t fucking moving.

“Sirius wake up, wake up, wake up. Come on. Please? Sirius?” James presses his ear to Sirius’s chest, searching for a pulse but he can’t hear anything, his own breathing deafening.

“Fuck,” the word trembles. “Fuck, fuck, fuck.” Sirius is lying on his back in the dirt, body at an awkward angle, head in James’s lap and he has no idea what to do. No idea how to fix this. And he just keeps thinking. Keeps thinking what if—what if they hit him with—

A hand on his shoulder has James jerking around, heart in his throat, air only returning to his lungs when he sees it’s Frank.

“I can’t tell if he’s breathing,” he blurts out before Frank even has a chance to speak. He sounds young. “I can’t tell if he’s breathing, I don’t know what happened but he isn’t moving, he isn’t—and Frank I can’t tell if he’s fucking breathing!”

Frank’s hand squeezes his shoulder. “Okay, alright, I’m gonna check okay?”

James nods, but he doesn’t move out of the way, doesn’t let go of Sirius, doesn’t stop touching him. Watching as Frank does exactly the same thing he had—pressing his ear to Sirius’s chest.

“He’s breathing,” the other boys says, pulling away.

“You’re sure?”

“I can hear his heart James.”

“You’re sure?” because he needs him to be sure, he needs this to be true. He won’t be able to keep it together if it isn’t. Everything he is will come crashing down if it isn’t.

It’s you and me.

That’s what Sirius had said that day on the kitchen floor.

It’s you and me.

That’s what James had had when he’d had nothing else.

“Here,” Frank takes one of James’s hands and positions his fingers on Sirius’s neck. “Feel.”

But James shakes his head. “I don’t feel it—Frank I can’t feel anything, I can’t—“

“James,” he says firmly but not unkindly. “Calm down, and focus.”

James breathes in and out, closing his eyes briefly and doing as Frank asked. There. Then. That’s when he feels it. A fluttering pulse beneath his fingers.

“He’s breathing,” he says with relief, eyes opening to find Frank giving him a weak smile.

“He’s breathing.”

The spell comes out of nowhere.

A flash of light.

And then—

“FRANK!”

PART II MARY

Contrary to popular belief, Mary has not forsaken magic. In fact, she practices frequently. Legilimency and Occlumency have been of particular interest to her. Learning how to build walls around her mind. Learning how to break down the walls that others have built.

Another interest of her's, is Fiendfyre.

The flames pouring from her wand have grown wings, soaring over the heads of the Death Eaters around her and roasting them where they sit. It smells like Sunday dinner. It's almost too easy honestly. Some of them seem to just be flinging themselves off their brooms. Earlier she caught sight of Frank trying to cushion their falls.

Mary has made no such efforts.

She pulls the fire back, it's a slow process, something this powerful takes patience and skill to control. But eventually she's able to put it out, nothing around her but smoke.

“Oh fuck off you prick,” Marlene's voice cuts through the night, pulling Mary's focus. She catches sight of her friend being dragged down to the ground by a man who appears to have latched onto the end of her broom.

Mary starts moving in that direction, incase Marlene needs back up. But as soon as they're on the ground Marlene has an elbow in the guy's face and then she hits him with a Stunner. Mary can't help but smile.

At least, until a third figure appears.

He drops down right behind Marlene and she's only just turned when the words; “Stupefy” cut through the night.

Stupefy isn't a particularly violent spell, except when used at close range. Marlene is thrown backwards, skidding across the dirt and landing on her front. She doesn't get up. The man is starting to mount his broom again when Mary presses the tip of her wand to the back of his neck.

“That,” she hisses, “was a mistake asshole.”

He swirls around but Mary ducks, knowing the spell is coming. She immediately bounces back, casting her own. The man in front of her is wearing a mask and throws up a shaky shield that trembles against her. Mary fires off another curse, and another, not giving him a moment to breathe, the power of her spells forcing him to take a step backwards. His shield is

barely holding, the air around him sparking and wobbling as it threatens to collapse under the onslaught of her attack. His mask, she notices, is also quivering.

It's a spell, she realizes. The masks are charms. A stupid waste of energy and impractical. Sometimes the Muggle way really is superior. Mary makes sure to cast her next spell with particular force. She sees the shield shatter, like glass, broken pieces falling away, taking his mask with it.

The minute his face is clear in front of her, she starts to laugh. "Oh this is too good. Tell me, does your daddy know where you are?"

"On your knees Mudblood," Barty Crouch sneers, raising his wand.

But Mary can't stop laughing. "Voldemort is sneaking a bunch of people across the boarder and he sends you to help them? You? What are you supposed to be exactly? Protection?" her laughing increases. "And here I thought you were such a good little boy now. Working for the Ministry and all that."

"I said ON YOUR KNEES!" his voice trembles, face flushed the way little kids get before they throw a temper tantrum. His confidence is shaken now that he hasn't got his mask. Now that she knows his secret.

"Yes I heard you," she finally manages to get herself under control, wiping tears of mirth from her eyes. "But you see, the problem Crouch, is I get on my knees for no man," she smiles then. "Men get on their knees for me." She fires off a binding curse that Crouch only barely dodges and then they're back at it again. This time though, he isn't trying to hide behind his shield anymore, giving as good as he gets.

"I'm surprised you're even here Macdonald," he grunts as one of her curses grazes his shoulder. "I heard you had gone full Muggle," the last word is said with the ought most disgust.

"You keeping tabs on me?" she asks, careful not to let her voice betray how much the thought unnerves her. "This little obsession of yours is getting out of hand."

"I'm not obsessed with you."

"I can't wait to see your father's face when he hears what you've been up to," she swerves around his Cruciatus Curse, enjoying the terror in his eyes at the mention of his father. "Tell me, do you think Voldemort will break you out of Azkaban after your daddy stuffs you in there? Or will he just let you rot? I mean, it's not as though he'll have any use for you once they all know the truth."

"No one will believe you," he snaps, with all the confidence of a spoiled brat. Then, slowly, a smile stretches across his face. "Just like last time."

The killing curse leaves her wand before she even has time to think about it. Disappointment flooding her when it misses by an inch. Mary still has nightmares. Sometimes. She wonders if they'll stop after she severs his head from his neck.

"I see you managed to get rid of the lipstick," she says coldly. "A shame. It really was your colour." Crouch's whole face flushes red with embarrassment.

"Fuck you!"

"Oh but darling you already did that," there are wars in those words. Ancient and on going. "Didn't you?" She can taste venom in her mouth.

Crouch falters.

Mary does not.

"Stupefy."

They're close enough, and Mary is angry enough, that when the spell hits him, square in the chest, it knocks him off his feet, like Marlene, sending him skidding into the distance. This is good. This is perfect. She wants to put her foot on his throat and watch him struggle to breathe. Wants to make sure he gets a Muggle's death.

She steps forward.

"Mary!"

Alice lands clumsily behind her, barely standing before she's walking. "We're going."

"What?"

A spell shoots down from above, hitting the earth between them with a crack, and leaving the ground scorched.

Alice grabs hold of Mary's wrist and starts dragging her towards Marlene with surprising strength. "We're going. Now."

The figures above are getting closer, Mary doesn't even have to look up to know it, she can feel them. Several more poorly aimed spells landing around them like meteors. The darkness is hiding them right now, but as soon as those men land Mary imagines their aim will improve.

"No wait," she looks back, still able to just make out the shape of Crouch in the darkness. "I have to—"

But then her stomach is suddenly in her mouth as Alice rips her from the earth, everything dissolving around her as she's side-alonged out of the valley. It's a wretched feeling, made worse by the fact that she wasn't expecting it.

Pain shoots up the fronts of her legs when they slam back onto solid ground, the world swimming around her as she tries to get her bearings.

"Jesus Christ Alice," she swears, gripping her head and staring up at the looming building in front of her. It's large and dilapidated, with hauntingly blank windows and rusted red brick

walls. A faded sign across the front reads; Purge and Dowse, Ltd. It's an illusion that Mary recognizes.

Somewhere in the distance there's thunder.

"St Mungos?" Mary turns back to Alice and quickly moves to help her with Marlene. "She's okay, it was a close proximity Stupefy, she'll wake up on her own," she says, assuming Marlene is the reason they're there. "She doesn't need a hospital."

"That's good," Alice starts pulling them towards the front of the building. "But they do." She nods up ahead and that's when Mary spots three figures slouched against the hospital wall. The boys.

James is cradling an unconscious Sirius in his arms, while Frank is stooped next to him, clutching his stomach.

"Holy shit Frank," Mary says when they get close enough for her to see what he's holding. Frank's shirt has been torn, and through the shreds Mary can make out a huge gash cutting across his abdomen, blood covering his arms and soaking his clothes.

Without thinking she uses her free hand to pull out her wand. "Vulnera Sanentur," she casts, watching as the skin knits itself back together. And then. Watching as it tears itself open again.

"What the fuck?"

Frank gives her a wane smile. "Tried that already."

"What happened?" Mary demands, but the older boy only shakes his head.

"Don't know what the spell was, but clearly it's some kind of cursed wound," his voice is rough, his skin glowing it's so pale. It's a miracle he's still conscious with the amount of blood he's losing.

"Mary, I'm gonna help Frank, can you handle Marlene?" Alice asks, pointedly not looking at Frank's gaping wound.

Mary nods, tightening her grip on her friend, taking on more of her weight. Her eyes trail down to James and Sirius. "Is he okay?"

"He's breathing," James replies almost automatically. There's something slightly panicked about James's eyes, about the way he holds Sirius. Mary wonders if Lily ever gets jealous of the way they are together. Mary certainly used to. Oh sure, it was Remus that Sirius wanted to screw, but it was always James that Sirius loved.

"C'mon, lets go inside," Alice says as she slips herself under Franks's arm and guides them through the wall to the building hiding behind.

The overwhelming sense that something is wrong hits Mary the second she crosses the threshold. There are voices, shouting, no one's at the front desk, a wheelchair left unattended

by the door. It's hard to tell exactly what is going on, everything just seems to be moving. People run past them in different directions, everyone agitated and nervous.

"Oi!" Alice grabs the arm of a man scurrying past. His eyes are wide behind a pair of wire framed glasses.

"Get out," he says, before Alice even has the chance to ask anything. "You have to get out."

"Get out?" Alice demands. "Of the hospital? Why?"

The man blinks several times in succession very quickly. "Death Eaters."

"In the hospital?" Alice asks, taken aback.

"Everywhere," he says ominously, before yanking his arm out of her grasp and continuing his sprint down the hall.

"Well that was helpful," Mary says, arms beginning to ache from the effort of having to keep Marlene supported. She adjusts her grip on her friend.

"What do you think he meant?" Alice asks as they survey the unraveling chaos around them. "That the Death Eaters are everywhere?"

James shakes his head. "Dunno."

"Alice," Frank says weakly, he's started to wilt, shoulders curving over, face buried in Alice's neck. "I need to sit."

"You need a Healer," she says, eyes scanning over the chaos. It is incredibly difficult to pick out who is who in the panicked crowd rushing around them, lights too bright after having been in the darkness outside, causing everything to blur.

"Can I get a fucking Healer please?" Alice shouts. For all that Frank was captain, Mary isn't sure she's ever heard someone sound quite so commanding.

"Can I get a healer please" someone behind them says mockingly.

Mary turns, fully ready to eviscerate them when she's pulled up short by the sight of a masked man in dark robes, his wand already pointed at them.

He tilts his head to the side, the mask's dead eyes staring right at them. "Well, well, what's this? Little baby Aurors and their friends."

Mary tries to shift subtly, to pull her wand into her palm again, eyes catching on James, knowing full well he's trying to do the same. It's a tricky business when your arms are full of your best mate.

"What do you say little Auror," he steps forward, wand pointed at Alice now, who, bless her, doesn't even flinch. "Do you wanna come with me, we could have lots of fun with you I'm sure. All the pretty tales you could tell."

Mary finally has her wand in the palm of her hand but it's an awkward angle and she can't quite lift her arm, not with the way she's supporting Marlene. She looks over at James again who, if the wrinkles on his face are any indication, is having the same problem.

"Expelliarmus," the word is said as an after thought. At first Mary thinks maybe it was one of them, until she sees Alice's wand flying out of her hand across the floor.

Fuck.

Fuck.

She needs to put Marlene down, she can't fight like this, except every atom in her body rebels against the idea of letting go of her here.

The Death Eater's wand presses under Alice's jaw forcing her head back. "We'll have to kill your little friends of course. This one's already half there anyway," he gestures to Frank who honestly might not even be conscious anymore, Mary can't tell.

She sees James turn, sees him shift his grip on Sirius, trying to hold him with a single arm around his waist so he can get his other hand free. But the motion is too big, the Death Eater notices. His attention and his wand swinging in James's direction before he's ready, he fumbles and Mary prepares to drop Marlene because what the fuck else is she going to do? All three of them opening their mouths at the same time, it's anyone's guess who's spell will hit first. Will actual find its mark.

And then—

"Incarcerous!"

Thick ropes soar through the air, wrapping the Death Eater in a vice grip, arms and legs tightly bound to his body. Without blinking Alice kicks in his knees, the man crumpling to the ground, spewing a tidal wave of profanities.

"Blimey," a man with shockingly ginger hair and wearing a brightly coloured paisley shirt steps forward. The man who cast the spell. "You lot are hard to find." He smiles at them all, the Death Eater on the floor squirming and kicking and failing to accomplish much of anything.

"Well," the man says, sounding far too chipper as far as Mary is concerned. "Best not waste any time, we wouldn't want to be late," he says as he starts walking down the hall, leaving Alice, James and Mary to stare at one another in confusion.

"Do you know him?" Mary asks Alice.

The older girl shakes her head. "Not a clue. James?"

"No."

"Are you all still standing there?" The ginger man calls from the end of the hall. "Come, come, we've got to be quick or we'll be stuck here for another hour."

There's a moment in which they all just stare at him, gobsmacked, before Alice releases an exhausted sigh. "Fuck it, no one else in this place has been of any use," she looks over at the boy currently clinging to her for dear life. "You still with me babe?"

"I'm here," Frank says, though his words are thick.

Alice nods, looking back out at the other two. "Well? Either of you got a better idea?"

"Than following a complete stranger?" Mary asks flatly.

"Nope," James says, throwing Sirius over his shoulder. "None. And apparently we're on a schedule so."

The ginger is looking rather impatient, though somehow still...pleasant? Mary can't figure it out but it's disconcerting to her. Cheer generally is.

They hobble down the hall towards him, Alice scooping up her wand on their way. Mary's arms are really beginning to struggle under Marlene's weight.

"You said we were hard to find," James asks as they catch up to their mysterious guide and he starts off again around the next corner. "That makes it sound like you were looking for us?"

The man nods, keeping a brisk pace that they're barely able to keep up with. "That's because I was." People run past them, doors slam closed, somewhere in the distance Mary thinks she hears something shatter.

"Why?" Alice asks, out of breath.

"Oh sorry, didn't I say?" he sounds like he genuinely doesn't know. Which is ridiculous, considering he's literally said nothing. "Dumbledore sent me."

"Dumbledore?" James repeats. "Sent you to St Mungos to look for us?"

"How the hell would Dumbledore know we're here?" Mary demands as they round another corner.

"He doesn't," the man replies easily. "He sent me to the coast, but all I found there were some dead Death Eaters and a few abandoned brooms matching the descriptions of the one's you were flying," he shrugs. "Abandoned brooms made me think you left in a hurry. Hospital seemed like a good place to check after that. And here you are," he shoots them a smile over his shoulder that looks sincere but that Mary doesn't trust anyway, just on the principle that smiley people are usually at least a little unhinged.

"I'm Arthur by the way," he adds quickly. "Arthur Weasley. Don't know if I mentioned that?"

"You didn't," Mary says flatly.

"You're not in the Order," James adds.

“No, no, I’m just a friend.”

A friend? Oh real legit that is. Real above board.

“Ah,” he stops suddenly in front of what looks to be a broom cupboard, nearly causing a collision as Mary does her best not to run right into James’s back. “Here we are,” he throws the door open and gestures for Alice to go inside. “Ladies first.”

She eyes him for about a second before moving forward, the rest of them following suit, cramming themselves into the tiny dark space that appears to be filled with cleaning supplies and bedpans.

“This is certainly cozy isn’t it?” Arthur Weasley says as he closes the door, squeezing past them and rummaging through the shelves at the back. “Ah ha!” he says triumphantly, turning around to place a yellow mop bucket in the centre of them. He looks up proudly.

“Er,” James says. “What’re we supposed to do with a bucket?”

“Oh, it’s a Portkey. Didn’t I mention that?”

Mary grits her teeth. If he says “didn’t I mention that” one more time she thinks she might actually murder him.

“We’ve set a few up in places we think we might need them. For emergencies and such.”

“A Portkey to where?” Alice asks.

“The safe house,” then he gives them that proud smile again. “My house.” Now that she has a good look at him Mary can see that he isn’t that old. Maybe thirty. With a slightly round face and pale skin dusted with freckles.

“What?” Alice demands. “We don’t need a safe house, we need a Healer,” she’s done an impeccable job so far of not, for a single moment, appearing panicked. But her voice cracks on those last words, her fear sneaking through.

“M’alright,” Frank mutters, head still buried against Alice’s neck, arms barely trying to keep the blood from escaping his wound anymore.

“Yes, we thought you might,” Arthur says softly. “It’s not safe here right now, especially not for you lot. But my wife sent for our neighbour before I left, she’s been trained as a Healer. She’ll be able to help.”

“Trained but not practicing?” Alice asks skeptically. “Why?”

Arthur shrugs. “You’ll have to ask her that, I’m afraid I don’t know.”

“I’m sorry,” Mary cuts in. “But you’re expecting us to take some random Portkey to some random house with someone we’ve never met before just because you say you’re friends with Dumbledore?” she looks around at the rest of them. “Is that sounding fucking mental to anyone else?”

“Yes—no—quite right,” he offers her a self-deprecating smile. “I’m doing this all wrong aren’t I? Dumbledore did think you might be a little suspicious so he had me—er—” he cuts himself off, looking around the circle again. “Sorry, which of you is James Potter?”

“Um...me?” James says.

“Ah wonderful,” the man’s eyes go bright as he turns to James. “I talked with your girlfriend, through the Floo, lovely girl by the way,” James does not appear to know what to say to that so Arthur continues bumbling on. “She told me to tell you, and this is a direct quote I’m afraid, that the night she stopped thinking of you as an irredeemable arrogant toe rag,” Alice snorts. “Was the night you found her crying in a stairwell over a boy and told her she needed to ‘Gryffindor the fuck up.’”

Mary turns to James, expression flat. “Did you really say that? Did the words “Gryffindor the fuck up” actually come out of your mouth?”

“When did Lily ever cry over boys?” Alice asks.

Mary rolls her eyes. “It’ll have been Severus. It was always bloody Severus.”

“Oh god, of course, I think my mind has just blocked that phase out of my memory.”

“I wish I was so lucky.”

“Guys,” Frank croaks, “any chance we could stay on topic?”

“Sorry,” Alice turns her head to kiss the top of his. “Sorry, of course. James?”

James nods, looking a little dazed. “Yeah—that—yeah. That’s what happened. I don’t think he could know that if Lily hadn’t told him.”

“Excellent, just in time,” Arthur says as the bucket in the middle of them begins to glow. “Everyone grab on now, and hold tight.”

Mary bites back the urge to tell him that they are not, in fact, children and have all used a Portkey before. She grips Marlene more tightly to her as she shifts to free one hand and grab hold of the bucket.

“Three,” Arthur begins to count, Mary rolls her eyes, “two, one.”

And the hospital floor disappears.

PART III JAMES

James lands on his back, Sirius on top of him. For a moment he can’t move, the air knocked from his lungs as the world slowly comes into focus—the dark sky above him, the light rain drops now more steady than they were before, splattering his glasses.

“Fuck,” someone groans.

“Marlene? Hey Marlene?”

James turns his head, Mary is kneeling next to Marlene, which isn’t that surprising until Marlene lifts her arm of her own volition, hand pressing to her forehead.

“Merlin my head hurts,” the blonde mutters.

Alice lets out a relived laugh, Mary reaching over and brushing the hair off of Marlene’s face. “That’s what you get for having your back turned.”

Marlene groans again. “What happened?”

“Stupefy, close range,” Mary says as she helps her friend up, reminding James that he should be doing the same. Sirius has not, unfortunately, made a similarly miraculous recovery, remaining lifeless in James’s arms. It’s awkward getting to his feet, his back screaming at him, still angry after the stunt he pulled on his broom.

“Careful,” Mary steadies Marlene when she wobbles on her feet, arms still wrapped protectively around her.

“Where the hell are we?” Marlene asks, and James finds himself looking around for the first time. There are fields and swamps surrounding them, a tall, teetering house in front. As if on cue, the door opens, the light from inside spilling out, like a light house, telling them where to anchor.

“That’ll be my wife,” Arthur grins, brushing himself off and starting towards the house. “C’mon, lets get you lot inside.”

“Who is THAT?” Marlene asks as he starts to walk away. “Oh my god Frank!”

“Lets talk inside yeah?” Alice says, strain clear in her voice. “I don’t like being out in the open like this.”

“What is going on?” Marlene hisses to Mary as they drag themselves up the lawn towards the open door.

“Honestly?” Mary says, still not leaving her side. “We have no fucking clue.”

It’s warm in the house. The ceiling low and made of thick wooden beams, the stone walls covered in pictures and over stacked bookshelves, not an inch of space free. Nothing in the house appears to match or follow any pattern, though all the furniture looks exceptionally comfortable. The second he’s over the threshold James feels a tiny bit of the fear that has been sitting in his chest all night give way. This is a good place. You can feel it in your bones.

“BOYS!” a woman screams at the bottom of the stairs, fiery hair piled on top of her head in a messy bun, her wand stuck through it. “BACK IN BED!” James hears the unmistakable noise of tiny scurrying feet and giggling over their heads.

“If they wake the babies I swear to Merlin I’ll feed them to the gnomes,” she grumbles, Arthur moving to her side and placing a quick kiss on her temple.

“I’ll go wrangle them in a minute,” he says. “First there are some people I have to introduce you—”

“Molly!” Alice says suddenly. James turns to look at her in surprise. “Oh my god, Molly, oh of course. I forgot. I don’t know how I could forget you married a Weasley. I wasn’t thinking. Oh thank goodness. I was really starting to worry we had just followed some strange man into a trap—no offensive Arthur.”

“None taken,” he says happily.

“You know them?” Mary asks, eyes moving between Alice, half-covered in Frank’s blood and struggling under his weight, to the couple in front of them.

“Cousins,” Alice chokes out.

Mary arches her brow. “You didn’t remember your cousin?”

“Well I’ve never met Arthur before,” she says defensively.

“You’ve never met your cousins’s husband?”

“To be fair, Purebloods have a lot of cousins,” James tries to help her explain.

“Here, Alice sweetheart, let me help,” Molly steps forward, slipping under Frank’s other arm.

“Sorry, if I get blood on you,” Frank mumbles, eyes remaining closed.

“That’s quite alright dear.”

“He needs a Healer,” Alice’s voice cracks. “Arthur said you had someone—we need to do something he’s lost too much blood.”

“Yes, Molly is—”

“I’m here.” A girl walks towards them from the kitchen, she has dirty blond hair that’s braided down her back, dipping well past her waist, and she’s wearing more colours than James thinks he has ever seen on a single person. “I can help.”

The minute James makes eye contact with her he recoils, stumbling backwards and nearly sending him and Sirius crashing to the ground. “Who the fuck are you?” he snaps before he can help himself. It’s the eyes. He’s seen those eyes before. Seen them soften and seen them harden and seen them slice through people. Grey and endless.

“Er—” Arthur says, clearly surprised by the outburst. “This is our neighbour—”

“Pandora Lovegood,” she introduces herself easily, not seeming particularly thrown by James’s reaction to her. “A pleasure to meet you.”

Frank actually raises his head. "Pandora Lovegood?" he says, groggily. "As in, formerly Lestrangle?"

"She's a Lestrangle!" James demands, arms tightening instinctively around Sirius.

Still she regards them all mildly, lips twitching like she thinks this is amusing. "You seem awfully outraged for someone currently holding the heir to the House of Black."

James takes another step back, like he thinks she's going to snatch Sirius from him. "He's not. Not anymore. Not for a long time."

"Well, in that case," she says calmly. "I am no longer a Lestrangle. Not anymore. Not for a long time."

James continues to glare at her but doesn't have much to say to that admittedly.

"How do you know her Frank?" Marlene asks, leaning heavily against Mary. She looks pale and tired, but at least she's awake.

Frank blinks, clearly struggling to focus, to keep his eyes open. "Surveillance. We keep an eye on people who might be...working for the other side. Person's of interest."

"Don't I feel special," her expression remains pleasant but there is an undeniable edge to the words.

"Arthur said you trained as a Healer?" Alice asks, clearly hoping to get them back on track.

Pandora nods. "I did."

"But you aren't practicing as one?"

An impish smile pulls at the older girl's mouth. "No. Too boring for me I'm afraid. They do everything very by the book at St Mungos. No room for imagination."

"That does not inspire confidence," Frank slurs.

"Well, by all means, you're welcome to bleed to death. If that inspires more confidence in you."

Alice snorts. "You're letting her help Frank," there is no room for discussion, not that Frank has enough energy to argue.

"There are some spare rooms on the second floor, we can take them both there," Molly looks over at James who is still clutching Sirius like he's expecting someone to come and steal him away.

"James?" Alice prods, and when he meets her eyes; "lets go, okay?"

He doesn't argue. Isn't in a position to. He can't help Sirius on his own, he wishes he could but he can't. So he follows Molly up the stairs, where she directs them into separate

bedrooms.

“I’ll see to the bleeder first,” Pandora says as she comes up behind them. “Seems a bit more urgent.”

“M’names Frank,” Frank grumbles.

“Well that’s not nearly as much fun to say.”

James carries Sirius into the other bedroom, lying him gently down on the bed. His arm sticks out at an awful angle no matter what James does—he can only imagine how painful it must be, how much damage all the moving around has done.

James’s own arms scream and ache now that they’re free of the weight of Sirius’s body, hanging lifelessly by his sides like they’ve given up. He pulls a chair over to Sirius’s bedside and sits down, dropping his head into his hands and exhaling.

He feels wrung out, emotionally, physically, and if he’s being honest, he still has no idea what the hell is going on. He doesn’t understand what the Death Eaters were doing at St Mungos or what that man meant when he told Alice they were everywhere. He doesn’t understand why Dumbledore sent Arthur Weasley to drag them out here to the middle of nowhere. He doesn’t know what he’s supposed to do next.

He sighs eventually, lifting his head to look at his frighteningly still friend. His dark hair has slipped lose of the bun he put it in earlier, clothes dirty and skin so goddamn pale. Nearly as bad as Frank’s.

“What’d they hit you with?” he asks desperately. “What’s wrong Sirius? Huh? How can I help? Tell me how to help?” he reaches out and takes the other boy’s hand, squeezing. “You’re not allowed to stay like this, you know that right? You’re not allowed to go and die on me. Not now. Not yet. We have so much shit we still have to do, you and me,” James swallows with difficulty, throat tight. “I’m not burying another fucking body Sirius. I’m not.”

“Talking is good.”

James jumps to his feet, heart hammering in his chest as he finds Pandora in the doorway, a small box of what James assumes are medical supplies in her hands.

“They can usually hear you,” she goes on. “I think it helps.”

“Merlin, what’re you a fucking ghost?” he snaps, clutching at his chest. “Don’t you knock?”

She arches her brow. “The door was open,” she says simply, as she walks forward, her attention going to Sirius. James watches her inspect him, watches her pull out her wand and fights the urge to rip it out of her hands when she points it at Sirius.

“How’s Frank?” James asks instead.

“Weak. He lost a lot of blood. I’ve been able to momentarily heal the wound but it won’t last, the curse used on him was too strong. There’s a potion that should help, but I’ll have to brew

it. I've given him blood replenishers to keep him stable until it's ready, they should be enough."

"Should be?"

Pandora looks up at him. "There are no guarantees in healing."

He can't hold her stare for long, can't stand looking into those eyes. "I thought you said healing was boring."

She laughs dryly. "I said being a Healer was boring. It's not quite the same."

Silence falls over them as she starts to run her diagnostics. James is reminded unwillingly of the night that Sirius showed up on his doorstep all those years ago, battered and bruised and missing his shoes. Remembers watching his mother run her wand over him.

His heart aches.

"Y'know, I've never met Sirius," Pandora says conversationally, wand hovering over Sirius's arm.

James doesn't particularly feel like making small talk but he still manages an "Oh?"

With the single flick of her wrist Pandora snaps Sirius's shoulder back into its socket with a chilling "schlick" noise that makes James wince. Sirius doesn't react though. His face doesn't even twitch.

"You would think with our families being so interbred we would have crossed paths but no," she goes silent, continuing her spell work, and James thinks she's finished with the conversation, which is more than fine by him, but then; "I did meet his brother though, at Hogwarts."

There's an uncomfortable scratching in James's chest. "I don't remember you being at Hogwarts," voice strained.

"Ah well," she says as she turns to her box, opening the lid and running her fingers delicately over the various vials inside. "I was five years above you so, our paths weren't exactly crossing." She shoots him a smile.

"But you knew Regulus?"

She shrugs. "I suppose it's more accurate to say I knew of him," and then, smirking. "When I was in seventh year, I was in my potions class, the highest level you know? We all had our OWLS and our NEWTS and were on our way to being great potioners, I mean not one person in there wasn't an incredible brewer."

James nods hesitantly as he watches her turn back to Sirius, not quite sure where this story is going. "But one class Slughorn gives us this brutal potion. One of the nasty ones, where the metal of the knife and the direction of your cuts all effect the outcome. Anyway, the most

advanced potions students in the school and not one of us could brew it,” she pours something from one of the vials onto her fingers and begins to massage Sirius’s temples.

“So the next day,” she goes on. “Slughorn brings in this little kid. And I mean little, I haven’t seen him in years but at eleven Regulus was tiny, fifty percent hair, and with the face of a dictator.”

James feels something in his chest squeeze.

“And this little kid just walks up to the table at the front of the class and starts working. I’m not sure he glanced up once. Now that I think about it, I’m not even sure he looked at the textbook,” she laughs to herself. “And he did it. We watched him work for three hours in complete bewitched silence and at the end he had perfectly brewed this potion that had stumped all of us.”

She pulls away from Sirius, drawing her wand again.

“It was impressive. Not sure it won him many friends but...”

“I don’t think making friends was ever Regulus’s strong suit,” James says before he can stop himself.

Pandora glances at him. “No, I don’t suppose it was,” before she starts casting again she reaches out and pushes the hair off Sirius’s forehead. It’s a gesture that reminds James so much of his mother that he nearly doubles over.

“I always did think he’d come around,” she says almost wistfully. “He seemed too smart to fall for it.”

“What?” James asks, not quite able to follow along, trying too hard to breathe.

“Regulus,” she clarifies. “I just figured he was smart enough that he’d work it out eventually. How hollow it all is—how hollow they all are. Nobody who understands the theories of potion brewing can really believe in blood purity. Muggle-blood and Pureblood is all the same in a cauldron.”

There are too many feelings raging inside James’s chest. He remembers nights spent talking for hours. Regulus going on about the books he was reading and the classes he was taking—he had favourite lectures and he would quote them sometimes. James would tease him but the truth was, he loved hearing it. Hearing all of it. Always greedy for anything Regulus was willing to give him.

He tries not to let everything that’s happened since turn those moments into something twisted. But maybe they always were. James doesn’t know anymore.

“Now this is fascinating,” Pandora murmurs, still bent over Sirius.

“What is?” James asks, stepping forward.

“Well, it appears that the spell he was hit with was a sort of distant cousin of the Jelly-Brain Jinx. It’s messing with his brain function, blocking his senses, essentially cutting him off from all outside stimulation and trapping him inside his head.”

James stares at her for a moment, wondering if his expression is properly communicating the absolute horror he currently feels.

“It really is a fascinating bit of spell work,” she says, oblivious. “I’ve never seen anything quite so complex. Did you manage to hear the incantation?”

It takes James a minute to speak, his mouth gone dry. “No.”

“Hm,” she frowns, turning back to her supplies. “That’ll make it more difficult to treat. Likely it will wear off on its own in a few hours—“

“A few hours,” James repeats, staring down at Sirius with wide eyes.

“There are certain ways to speed up the return to full consciousness, at least with the Jelly-Brain Jinx, I’ll try those and see if they help. If he’s still under in the morning we’ll have to reassess.”

“What—I mean why would anyone even use this spell? Why not just kill the person you’re fighting?”

Pandora shrugs, “Some people like to draw things out,” she says in the same tone of voice that one might use to describe the weather. “Though I expect it’s probably used most often on the subjects of interrogation. I’m sure it breaks down people’s mental walls rather efficiently.”

Fuck.

“You think they were going to try and interrogate us?”

Her grey eyes find his. “Isn’t that what you were going to do to them?”

James doesn’t bother answering, instead reaching out to take Sirius’s hand again.

“I’ll be right back, there are just a few things I left downstairs that I’ll need,” she places a vial on the bedside table. “That’s a pain potion, he’ll want it when he wakes up,” she looks pointedly at James. “I’m assuming you intend to stay with him?”

James has to clear his throat before he can speak. “Yeah,” he croaks. “Yeah I’m gonna stay with him.”

James never lets go of Sirius’s hand—not when Pandora treats him, not when she leaves. He knows Sirius can’t feel him. Knows he can’t hear him. Knows he’s probably losing it, because this is his worst nightmare. But he hopes, irrationally, illogically, that somehow

Sirius knows that he's there. Even without having any sense of the world. Without being able to touch or smell or see. He hopes he just...knows. The way they feel each other when they fly. A sixth sense. Faith.

His eyes have glazed over and his brain has gone blissfully quiet when he hears a commotion downstairs. By the time he's blinked himself awake enough to turn towards the door there are already footsteps bounding up towards him. And then Remus is sprinting into the room.

"James," he gasps when he sees him, eyes dropping instantly to Sirius. "Is he—is he okay? They didn't say—I asked but no one knew anything and I—fuck, he looks—"

For the first time in hours James lets go of Sirius, going to Remus and taking him by the shoulders. "Hey, breathe okay? Breathe. He's going to be fine. He got hit by a curse but it'll wear off."

"What curse?"

James shakes his head. "No idea, never heard of it, but he's—I mean apparently he's trapped in his head."

Remus stares at him with an expression James is sure mirrors the one he'd given Pandora. "Is that a fucking joke?"

James grimaces. "Don't think so, no."

"Jesus Christ," he looks back at Sirius, pulling away from James and moving to his side. He sits on the bed, taking the hand that James had been holding—taking his place—which makes James feel a weird itch of jealousy that he doesn't like in the least.

"He should wake up soon," James says awkwardly from the middle of the room, no longer sure of his role here.

Remus nods. "He's been like this for...?"

James shrugs even though Remus isn't looking at him. "Maybe two hours? Three?"

"Hours? Fuck," and then; "Lily came with me—she's downstairs."

"Right," James still lingers in the doorway, staring at his two best friends. "Um—there's a pain potion on the bedside table, he might want that when he wakes up, I kinda dislocated his shoulder trying to stop him from running head first into the ground."

"Okay—James?" Remus looks over at him. "Are you alright? Were you hurt too or...?"

James gives him a shaky smile. "I'm fine. No injuries to report," well, except his back, but it doesn't seem worth mentioning.

"Good. That's good," Remus's attention returns to Sirius.

“I’ll leave you to it then...” James doesn’t want to go, it feels wrong, but at the same time staying feels like forcing himself into a scene that has no room for him anymore.

Eventually his feet start moving, carrying him down a set of winding wooden stairs that announce each of his steps with an incredibly loud creak.

“James!” he’s barely reached the ground before Lily is flinging herself into his arms. His upper body screams in protest but James doesn’t care, holding her to him and squeezing her tight, like he hasn’t seen her in years.

“Are you ok?” she asks as he places her back on her feet, her hands skimming over him, checking for injuries.

“I’m okay.”

She cups his cheeks, her green eyes bright as they meet his. “We didn’t know,” after a few seconds. “God James, there was a while there where we just...where we thought maybe...” she shakes her head.

“Hey,” he covers her hands with his own, pressing them closer. “I’m okay.”

Her smile is a little watery. “No more missions for you. You can be my trophy husband from now on.”

“What, and let you go out and do all the dangerous stuff?”

“Exactly.”

“I’m just meant to sit at home looking pretty for you?” she laughs, the noise choked as she leans forward, going up on her toes.

“Yes.”

They kiss. Soft and gentle. An “oh hi I’m so glad to see you” an “I missed you” an “I love you, I love you, I love you.”

Their foreheads are still pressed together when the sounds of crying fill the room, followed swiftly by a small ginger head darting down the stairs in footy pyjamas. The kid stops dead in his tracks at the sight of them, eyes going wide. Before any of them can speak a voice comes hurtling through the ceiling.

“WILLIAM ARTHUR WEASLEY YOU GET BACK HERE RIGHT NOW!”

Though James wouldn’t have thought it possible, the boy’s eyes grow even larger. “Please don’t tell her you saw me,” he says quickly, before darting off again and disappearing into the kitchen.

“Wow,” Lily watches the kid flee. “I feel like I just got a glimpse into your childhood.”

“Pfft,” James scoffs. “I was an angel, I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Uh-huh,” she pinches his side as the crying grows louder.

The cause of this is made apparent when Molly appears down the stairs with two squirming infants in her arms.

“Bill! Bill—Arthur—oh for goodness sake’s,” she’s wearing a housecoat, bags under her eyes that can’t just be from tonight. “Will you two take them for a minute?” she asks Lily and James. “I need to go get that little menace before he breaks something else.”

Without waiting for an answer she shoves a baby into each of their arms. “That’s Fred and that’s George,” she pauses for a minute, eyes going back and forth between the babies. “Or maybe it’s the other way ‘round, what do I know. They’ll not be able to tell that you’re calling them the wrong names anyway.”

James bites his lip, stifling a laugh as he adjusts the position of the tiny crying child in his arms.

“You didn’t happen to see where my oldest went did you?” she asks, eyes scanning the room around them.

“Nope,” James says automatically.

“Didn’t see anyone,” Lily adds. “Sorry.”

Molly waves her words away. “He’s a slippery one—Bill! Bill you get out here right now before I ground you for the rest of your bloody existence!”

James snorts as she walks off, starting to gently rock the red faced infant in his arms. “Hey buddy,” he says as the kid continues to wail. James nods understandingly. “Yeah, I get that. Honestly we could all do with a good cry now and then huh?” the little thing blinks up at him, eyes wet, sobs turning into hiccups.

“Bet it’s right rubbish being a baby, you can’t fly, can’t eat any sweets, bleak as hell that.”

There’s some gurgling that James takes as agreement, still rocking back and forth as he looks over at Lily who has her eyes intently on him, her own baby somehow already fast asleep in her arms.

“Uh-oh,” James says. “You see that buddy? She’s giving us googley eyes.”

Lily laughs. “I am not.”

“Mm, pretty sure you are. What d’you think big guy?” he looks down at the baby who slobbers a little. James considers this another sign that they’re on the same page. “He says I’m right.”

“Oh does he?” Lily asks.

“Mhm, you’ve gone all gooey Evans. It’s pathetic.”

“You’re the one carrying on conversations with a baby.”

James makes a mildly offended noise. “I’m just trying to be polite to little Fred-George here.”

Lily laughs again. “If your’s is Fred-George does that make mine George-Fred?”

“Sounds about right to me.”

Lily looks down at her baby, kissing the top of his peach-fuzz head like she can’t help it. When her eyes find James’s again her smile grows.

“Now who has googley eyes?”

But James doesn’t fight it. “Me. Definitely.”

Her expression softens. “You want kids Potter?”

“Yeah, loads.”

“Loads?”

“Well you can’t just have one.”

Lily arches her brow. “I mean, unless there’s been a change in the laws I’m pretty sure you can.”

James rolls his eyes. “Sure but they’ll be lonely. You’ve gotta give them someone to play with.”

“I see,” Lily says, something vaguely sympathetic in her eyes. And maybe a little sad too. He wonders if she’s thinking about her sister. “How many is “loads” then?”

The answer comes to him automatically. “Four. At least.”

“At least? Jesus.” She continues rocking George-Fred. “And I expect you’ll be wanting all boys then?”

James is actually surprised by the question, he hadn’t really thought about it. Eventually he shrugs, causing the baby in his arms to gurgle again. “Not really that bothered either way. As long as they wanna play Quidditch with me that’s all that matters.”

Lily’s face does something he can’t decipher.

“What?” he asks.

“What?”

“What’s that look for?” he gestures to her with his chin.

She shrugs. “Nothing, I just...love you a lot sometimes.”

James grins. “Well obviously, I’m awesome.” Fred-George starts to laugh and James looks down at him and then back up at Lily, positively beaming. “I made him laugh!”

“You did not make him laugh.”

“Uh, pretty sure I did. I told a joke and he laughed. Ergo, I made him laugh.”

Lily rolls her eyes, biting back a smile. “It was a coincidence.”

“Mm, you can’t prove that.”

“You’re an idiot.”

James only smiles at her. “Yeah, but you love me remember?”

She shakes her head, the pair of them going quiet. James watches his baby’s eyes droop, his little mouth stretching in a yawn as he slowly falls asleep. Honestly, James could go for a nap too right about now.

“Okay,” Lily says eventually.

James looks up but she’s still staring at the kid in her arms. “Four Quidditch players.”

Something stupid and fluttery happens in James’s stomach. “Yeah?” he asks, voice coming out a little more sincerely than he means it to.

She meets his eyes. “Yeah.”

PART IV REMUS

He can’t remember if he’s ever seen Sirius this still. He doesn’t think so. Sirius Black is all action, all movement, all decisions that really ought to take more time. Even when he’s sleeping he still finds ways to struggle. Seeing him like this...frozen. Behaving. It’s so unnatural it makes Remus’s skin crawl.

He hates sitting here, being useless. Hates that he wasn’t there when Sirius needed him. That he never seems to be there anymore. He hates Sirius a little bit too.

He’s still holding his hand, keeps pressing his thumb over Sirius’s pulse just to reassure himself. James said that Sirius would be okay and Remus believes him, he does, except—except the room is so quiet. And Sirius is so dim. And everything about it feels wrong. So he keeps checking. He’s become familiar with Sirius’s pulse. He knows how to make it race and how to make it slow and how to hold it tenderly.

When everything first started falling apart tonight they didn’t know what had happened to Sirius and the others. They didn’t know if they were still alive or if they’d been taken hostage or if they were laying in a valley somewhere broken and bleeding out. Not knowing was the worst feeling.

Because he hates Sirius a little bit.

But he would bite off his own arm before he would live in this world without him.

Sirius groans and Remus feels his whole body react to the sound, instantly sitting up.

For the first time since he got here Sirius moves, his face—his beautiful face—comes back alive and he squirms, hand pulling out of Remus's.

“Sirius? Hey—hey Sirius?”

The other boy's eyes fly open, wide and grey, he gasps like he's just been pulled back above the tide. “Fuck,” Sirius says, instantly closing his eyes again. “Fuck.” His voice is soft, a whisper.

Remus waits for more but none comes, Sirius's eyes remaining firmly shut. After a few seconds Remus reaches out, placing a tentative hand in Sirius's hair but the other boy flinches and Remus instantly pulls away.

“Sirius?” he matches Sirius's volume, keeping his voice low.

There's more silence before Sirius eventually speaks. “Hey Moons,” his voice gravel.

“Hey,” Remus wants to touch him so badly but he holds back.

“Sorry,” Sirius says, mouth wrapping awkwardly around the word. “It's just...a lot,” he swallows. “I just need—” but his voice splinters off. “It was so quiet,” he manages eventually, and there is something heartbreaking about those words.

“You're okay now,” Remus says instantly, not sure if it's what Sirius needs to hear but not knowing what else to say. “You're safe.”

Sirius gives him a stiff nod, eyes still squeezed shut.

“Can I—can I touch you?” Remus asks.

Sirius shakes his head. “Too much.”

“Okay,” Remus whispers back. He doesn't know what that means exactly, doesn't know how to help. How do you help someone who's just been trapped alone in their head for several hours? “Do you want—there's pain potion, would that help?”

Another pause. “No. It's not really—” his voice breaks off, he exhales and forces the words to come back. “Not really that kind of pain.”

Remus hates that answer.

“What do you need me to do?” he asks eventually, desperately.

A shaky smile pulls at Sirius's mouth. “Stay.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” which feels like all he says these days, feels like what he’s trying to say even when he can’t open his mouth. The promise he breaks over and over again.

Remus isn’t sure how much time passes, how long they sit there, Sirius no longer still like he was, expressions flashing across his face that Remus tries and fails to understand. He does his best not to fidget, does his best to hold still and not let his mind spiral worrying about all the things this spell might have done to Sirius or wondering how long the after effects will last.

“Do you remember,” Sirius’s soft voice drifts through the room, “when we made the map?”

The question is so out of the blue that it actually startles a laugh from Remus. “Of course I do.”

“You didn’t think we could do it.”

“Well, to be fair, it was a very complicated piece of magic and we were a bunch of idiots.”

That soft smile comes back to Sirius’s face, his eyes still closed. It makes him look young. Makes him look like he did back then. Before it all got so complicated.

Actually, that’s not really true.

Things were always complicated for them.

The werewolf and the runaway.

The monster and the prince.

“I believed in us,” Sirius goes on. And then; “I believed in you.”

Those words make Remus’s heart flip-flop in his chest even though he knows they don’t really mean anything.

“It was a group effort,” he says eventually.

“Mm,” Sirius hums. “But you were the reason it worked. You’re the reason any of it works.”

“Any of it?” Remus asks tentatively, throat tight.

“The four of us, the pranks, my life,” he laughs quietly, it’s a noise Remus has never heard from Sirius before. “It works because of you. I don’t think I really understood that before. But when you’re gone it’s all just...broken pieces.”

Remus has no idea what to say to that, what to do with the complicated knot of feelings in his chest. But, predictably, Sirius doesn’t give him the time to sort it out, because a few seconds later he’s blinking his eyes open, letting out a shaky exhale before turning his head towards Remus.

“Hey Moons,” he says again, this time looking straight at him. Those eyes will be the death of Remus one day, he just knows it.

“Not too much?” he asks gently, once he’s found his voice again.

Sirius grins and he almost looks like his normal self. “Worth it.”

PART V MARY

They sit in a living room filled with mismatched furniture and more pashmina rugs than Mary has ever seen in her entire life. Marlene is on one side of her and Lily on the other, Arthur Weasley taking the armchair across from them.

They hear the creaking of the stairs before they see James coming back into the room. “Sirius is awake,” he says before they can ask. “But he’s not strong enough to come down and Remus isn’t leaving his side. Pandora’s still working on Frank’s potion but Frank and Alice are asleep anyway,” he perches himself on the arm of the sofa. “So it looks like it’s just us.”

They all turn to Arthur who nods understandingly. “Right, got it, so,” he rubs his palms together. “Where to begin?”

Mary assumes this is a rhetorical question but the silence stretches on for a painfully long time. Eventually, when he continues to seem at a loss, Lily speaks. “The Death Eaters have taken the Ministry.”

Mary turns to stare at her. “Excuse me?”

“They’ve what?” Marlene demands at the same time.

“It’s temporary,” Arthur jumps in quickly. “They’ve been growing in numbers, in power, but they still don’t have enough of either to actually run the government long term.”

“They do have enough to hold it hostage though,” Lily adds.

“And the group from Bulgaria was...what?” James asks. “A distraction?”

Arthur tilts his head from side to side. “The group from Bulgaria was Voldemort trying to bring in reinforcements, to show that he’s an actual threat to the Ministry.”

“So Dumbledore sent us to fight an army then?” Mary asks flatly.

“It wasn’t clear that that’s what they were before tonight, he was just as blindsided by that as the rest of us,” Arthur fidgets. “The information we had really did make it seem like it was a mission to bring over specific high ranking members of his supporters from the continent, not...”

“A whole bloody platoon?” Mary finishes for him.

Arthur gives her an apologetic look. “Precisely.”

“Okay, okay, but what the hell does that have to do with St Mungos?” James’s hair is an absolute disaster. You can almost always tell the state of James’s distress by the height of his hair.

“They went after a few other government institutions,” Arthur explains. “They weren’t able to completely shut them down like the Ministry but...well...you saw the state St Mungos was in.”

“Bastards,” Marlene hisses. “What kind of assholes attack a hospital?”

“The chair of St Mungos is Muggle-born so,” Arthur grimaces. “It has been the target of a few small scale attacks before, this one was the biggest of course.”

“Wait, I’m sorry, so the Death Eaters are in control of the Ministry?” Mary demands.

“Voldemort and the Minister are currently barricaded in his office...negotiating.”

That instantly makes the hair on the back of Mary’s neck stand up. “Negotiating?” she repeats slowly. “What exactly are they negotiating?”

Arthur wipes a hand over his face, looking tired for the first time all night. Not that it’s night anymore. Through the windows—which are all different sizes and shapes, because nothing in this house is consistent—the first pink and gold strips of light can be seen on the horizon.

“The Dark Lord has certain demands he wants met. He’s asking that all Muggle-borns and Half-bloods be removed from government offices. Including teachers at Hogwarts and Healers at St Mungos.”

“What?” Marlene demands, outraged.

“There’s no way that the Minister is going to agree to that,” James says confidently.

“Moody is working on regaining control of the Ministry, teams of Aurors have been sent in, but...” Arthur trails off again.

“But?” James prods.

“But there were a lot more sympathizers in the Ministry than we previously believed.”

Of course there were. Fucking politicians.

“What does that mean?” James asks, sounding agitated.

“It means...” Arthur struggles. “It means that agreeing to Voldemort’s terms is starting to look like the best way to end this without any bloodshed.”

There’s silence after those words, until Mary breaks it with a laugh.

“Without any bloodshed,” she repeats derisively. “You lot really think this is where this ends? That you fire a few people and Voldemort and his merry band of assholes will just leave us all alone?”

“I don’t believe anyone thinks that, no,” Arthur says softly.

“This is not harmless,” she’s on a roll now. “If the Ministry agrees to these terms, if they fire all the Muggle-borns and Half-bloods they are sending a message. That Voldemort is right. That these people are lesser. That WE,” she gestures between herself and Lily, “are lesser. And if you think that blood won’t be spilt because of that than you haven’t been fucking paying attention.”

Mary is breathing heavy, her words leaving silence in their wake. It’s fine, she doesn’t care, let them be uncomfortable. Let them feel it. Eventually Marlene reaches out, hand wrapping around Mary’s wrist and squeezing.

“She’s right,” Lily says, sounding a little bit less like she’s about to decapitate everyone than Mary. “If we let them get away with this it’ll be like admitting defeat.”

Arthur looks back at them helplessly, palms upturned. “Listen, I don’t disagree with you, but unfortunately I’m not in charge of making decisions. All I know is that the feeling at the moment is that this is the best option.”

Mary laughs coldly. “And whose feeling is that exactly? I mean how many Muggle-borns are consulted when Albus fucking Dumbledore is making these decisions huh? Or Alastor Moody? For the people meant to be defending us you lot really don’t seem to talk to us all that often. To give a damn what we think or what we want.”

“Mary,” Marlene says quietly from beside her, and Mary doesn’t know if it’s meant to caution her or support her but she doesn’t try to figure it out.

“I mean the only people who aren’t Purebloods here are me, Lily and Remus and would any of us even be here if we hadn’t fucked one of you?”

James actually chokes, Marlene’s eyes going wide, Arthur’s face flushing a deep red. Lily, on the other hand, laughs.

“I’m so sick of this,” she goes on. “I’m so sick of this whole “we support you but only when it’s convenient” bullshit. There should be fucking bloodshed. At this point there should be fucking bloodshed.”

She gets off the couch because she needs to move and because she has about a dozen more rants in her and she knows if she doesn’t walk away now she’ll never be able to stop herself. For all his annoying cheer this is not Arthur Weasley’s fault. Maybe it isn’t anybody’s fault. Maybe it’s everyone’s fault. She’s just angry. She’s just so goddamn angry.

She walks through the open doorway into the front room, standing at the window with her arms crossed and doing her best to keep it together. The sky is navy blue, the sun growing stronger and stronger in the distance. She cannot help but wonder what this day will be like

for all the Muggle-borns and Half-bloods about to lose their jobs. Where will they go? How will they support themselves? Who's going to fucking help them?

She hears footsteps behind her, and then Lily is leaning against the wall next to her, Marlene wrapping her arms around her and resting her chin on Mary's shoulder.

"That was...pretty hot actually," Marlene says, causing Mary to snort.

"Careful, Dorcas might get jealous."

"Nah," Marlene says easily, "she'd agree with me."

Lily nudges Mary's foot to get her attention, something heavy in her eyes. "Thank you, for saying all that," she nods back towards the living room. "Someone needed to, it's not fair that it always has to be you."

"Though I don't know if that speech would have been quite as scandalous if Lily had said it," Marlene adds. "No offence Lily."

"Oi, I can be scandalous okay?"

"Uh-huh."

"I'll believe it when I see it Evans," that earns Mary an eye roll.

They're all quiet for a moment, watching the sun come up, Marlene still wrapped around Mary, Lily pressing their shoulders together.

"It's us first," Lily says eventually, seemingly out of nowhere.

Mary looks over at her, brow arched.

"The Order is...the Order," Lily waves a dismissive hand, looking intently at Mary and then Marlene. "But it's us first," she gestures between them. "Before all the rest of it, before everything else. You lot will always be what matters most. You know that right?" she looks specifically at Mary now.

They stare at each other for what feels like a long time, like a challenge. Lily doesn't flinch. Doesn't drop her gaze. Green eyes bright and fierce. Eventually, Mary nods. "Yeah," she says slowly, meaning it far more than she ever thought she would. "Yeah, I know."

Chapter End Notes

Hey,

so,

here's the thing, I'm struggling with this fic at the moment.

I was trying to write both these characters as flawed and complex, they don't always do the right things because I don't think people always do the right things especially in extreme circumstances (especially when they're kids). That being said, I think I've made mistakes in telling this story and in the ways I've written some of these characters and I promise you I get that. Believe me. It was never my intention to write anything that was dismissive of sexual assault or any other form of abuse or trauma and I cannot express how sorry I am if that's what I did write or if I have in anyway contributed to any toxicity in this space.

Thanks for listening and for reading, appreciate all of you!

Chapter 48

Chapter Summary

I do know that Sirius got his motorcycle in 1977. I simply don't care. Time is a construct. I don't recognize its authority.

Chapter Notes

tw: Drug use (in the form of potions)

tw: I mean like the mildest reference to sexual content

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

October 1979

PART I REGULUS

This.

This is good.

He should have been doing this from the beginning.

Should have been doing this years ago.

The potions make the world distant and soft. Everything in him just a little less sharp. A little less in focus. He wonders if this is how everyone else feels all the time? If this is how they're able to walk through life unafraid. Like their memories aren't something heavy they have to drag with them.

Days and nights blend, he's able to function enough. Enough to do what's expected of him. But he rarely goes to meetings anymore. Originally it was the thought of being in Lucius's house that made him stay away, now he just can't be bothered.

Grimmauld remains largely empty aside from him and Kreacher.

Evan visits from time to time, Barty less, Cerci when she can get away from her job and her mother who has grown profoundly unhappy with their relationship, as it becomes more and more apparent that it won't be ending in a marriage proposal. But most of the time it's him. Just him. Rooms left dark, left empty, the house starting to curl in on itself, like a plant that

can't find the sun. Kreacher does his best to tend to it but it's no use, and Regulus is certainly not helping.

"Master Regulus is not eating enough," the house elf mutters one day as he watches Regulus poking reluctantly at his dinner. "Is it being Kreachers fault sir? Is he not making it right? Is there something wrong with Master Regulus's meals?"

Regulus looks up at him and manages a weak smile. "Your cooking is excellent as always Kreacher, I'm just not...hungry."

Kreacher throws a dish towel in the air in frustration. "But you is never being hungry anymore!"

Which is true. The potions fill him up and make food so much less appealing, his taste dulled. It's all just mush.

"I'll eat more, I promise," Regulus says as he shovels a fork full of pasta into his mouth, but when Kreacher turns his back Regulus vanishes the rest of his plate.

"Are you sick?"

He blinks, coming back to himself, sitting on his bed while Cerci stares at him with worried eyes. He isn't sure how much time has passed between this conversation and the one with Kreacher.

Is it the next day? Is it two days later? A week? He's aware that some time has passed, obviously, it's just the specifics that his mind doesn't quite seem able to hold onto.

"Regulus?"

"Sorry," he mutters, rubbing at his face. "Sorry, I'm just tired."

Cerci doesn't look like she believes him. "I think you need a Healer, my family knows a good one, I can take you right now, I have the whole afternoon free—"

"No, I don't want that," he knows he sounds cranky and he doesn't mean to be, but he can't help it. "I'm fine. I told you I'm fine."

"I know what you've told me," it's the first time he thinks he's ever heard her sound irritated. "But you're lying, and not even very well."

He sighs, flopping down onto his bed and staring up at the ceiling. A few seconds later the mattress dips and Cerci sits next to him, face hovering above his.

She bites on her lower lip. "I'm worried about you."

"That's a waste of energy."

She rolls her eyes. "Right, okay well, I'm going to do it anyway."

He shrugs, still staring at the ceiling. "Your prerogative I guess."

He hears her sigh, a tense silence falling over them. The house creaks and groans around them, begging for help. For a little attention. A little magic to soak up. This place has always been the stronghold of the Black family, he's sure it's never felt so lonely before. He's a bad caretaker. A bad son. A bad brother.

"I miss Boo," Cerci breaks the silence eventually, because of course she does. "You never have him around anymore."

"It's just a spell," Regulus replies flatly. "Not a pet."

The truth is, Regulus can't cast his Patronus when he's high. That was...surprisingly hard at first. He'd grown used to the ghostly presence at his side, to the warmth it summoned up in him, a physical representation of something that had long ago disappeared from his life. But Boo never helped him sleep, never stopped him thinking, so in the end he kept swallowing the potions. He barely even notices the absence anymore.

"Alright, enough, get up," Cerci hops off the bed, taking Regulus's wrist and tugging on it until he reluctantly sits up.

"Why are we getting up?" he grumbles.

"You're going to bathe, because quite frankly you look like you haven't had a bath in a week."

To be fair, he might not have.

"And I'm going to make lunch."

"Kreacher will be upset if you make food, you know that," he says, though he does force himself off the bed.

"Well, he can help then. C'mon, lets go, I'm assuming you can run the bath yourself? Or have you forgotten how?"

"You're hilarious."

She smiles at him, maybe the first genuine smile he's seen since she arrived. "I know."

Regulus does bathe and Cerci does make lunch (with Kreacher's help) and a few hours later she leaves, still looking at him like she's worried he's going to fall apart the minute she's out the door.

He doesn't though.

He isn't.

Falling apart that is.

Falling implies some sort of speed and destination.

If anything, Regulus is rotting.

He sleeps at some point. Gets up at some point. Crushes ingredients and stirs cauldrons and bottles potions and whenever he starts thinking too hard about where those potions are going or what they're being used for he drinks his own. Then floats around the halls. Haunting his own house.

He isn't particularly observant at the moment, which he supposes is how it happens that he walks up the stairs to his bedroom one day and finds the Dark Lord standing there, staring at something on his desk. For a moment Regulus is certain this is some sort of hallucination, rubbing his eyes and wondering if he's swallowed a bad batch of potions. But all thoughts of hallucinations disappear when the man in front of him turns around. The cold chill that runs through Regulus then is more vivid and real than anything he's felt in weeks.

"Regulus," the man says, voice slightly high and boyish despite his age. His skin seems almost translucent, eyes deep and dark and too large for his gaunt face. "It has been too long."

Regulus can't say that he agrees.

"My lord," he finally manages to force out. "I—I'm sorry I wasn't expecting you," he wracks his blurry brain for any memory of an owl or Fire Call, anything that would have warned him of Voldemort's visit, but his thoughts slosh around in his head, running into one another and providing him with no answers.

"No, my apologies, I didn't have time to call ahead I'm afraid." The man's gaze is sharp and Regulus wonders if he can tell that he isn't at his best.

"No apology necessary," Regulus says, forcing himself to speak slowly, to annunciate, running over every word in his head a dozen times before speaking, not trusting his judgement a single bit. For a moment the man in front of him simply watches, long bony fingers stroking the book on the desk next to him.

"I see a great deal of myself in you Regulus."

Which is about as shocking a statement as any. For a moment Regulus flounders, not sure how to respond. He can feel his fear scratching against the cage he's put it in, but it's distant and distorted by the potions running through his body.

"I—that is far too kind, I can't imagine I deserve the comparison." He means that and doesn't at the same time.

Voldemort smiles again, the expression not reaching his eyes. "I have great hopes for you, as does your mother, your mind is far above many of your peers and intelligence like that

excites me.”

Regulus is still standing in the doorway, not daring to step further into the room, to close the space between them. He’s overly aware of how alone he is. Of the bed beside them. Of all the other times he has found uninvited guests in his bedroom.

“But I think we can both agree,” the Dark Lord goes on, “that you could be doing more.”

God, Regulus wishes he was sober.

“I want nothing more than to serve you, my lord,” he says tightly, he may not feel his fear as acutely as he normally would, but that hasn’t stopped his legs and hands from shaking.

“That is good to hear,” Voldemort says, as though Regulus could say anything else. “Lucius was afraid that you would be resistant.”

Regulus grits his teeth. “Was he?” he asks thinly.

“He feared your withdrawal from social life was a sign of your wavering support for our cause. But I was never concerned. Social connections are of little importance. I care only for your skill and your loyalty.”

Regulus swallows back the bile crawling up his throat. He doesn’t know why Lucius has been trying to turn Voldemort against him, if he’s still bitter over James or what, but it’s concerning. Whatever Voldemort might say now to his face, Regulus knows that Lucius is one of the most powerful members of his inner circle.

“My skill and loyalty are your’s my lord, of course.”

The man before him nods. “Taking the Ministry was far easier than we thought it would be,” he goes on bluntly. “We intend to try again and hold it this time. I want you to be involved. I want someone with intelligence and not simply ambition making decisions on the ground.”

There is absolutely nothing Regulus wants less. His stomach gives a lurch, threatening to vomit up the few bites of food he’s choked down today.

“I would be honoured,” he barely gets the words out.

“Excellent. Severus will contact you soon with further details.”

As if this offer couldn’t be made more unappealing.

“This book,” Voldemort says suddenly, tapping the cover he’s been stroking for the entirety of the conversation. “Where did you get it?” his tone is casual but a chill immediately runs down Regulus’s spine.

He squints, trying to work out which book it is without stepping forward. When he takes too long to answer the Dark Lord presses on.

“I read it once, at Hogwarts,” he looks down at the cover. “I wasn’t aware there was another copy.”

Regulus’s chest grows tight, suddenly realizing what book it must be. “I found it in the library here,” he lies, not wanting to bring Cerci’s name into it.

“Hm,” Voldemort hums softly, seemingly deep in thought before he picks the book up, holding it tightly in his grip. “Would you mind terribly if I borrowed it?” he asks, the request so ridiculous that Regulus almost laughs. As though he has the power to deny the Dark Lord anything he wants.

“Of course not, please.”

The older man smiles again. “Thank you,” he pulls a pocket watch from his robes—a small metal thing, ornately engraved, catching the weak sunlight dripping through Regulus’s window. “I must be going unfortunately,” he says before snapping it shut. “But it’s been a pleasure to see you again Regulus. Do take care of yourself.”

He isn’t sure why those last words sound like a threat, but he’s still trying to calm his heartbeat even after Voldemort has left the room.

It takes him a while but eventually he’s moving again, scrambling towards his desk, ruffling through the mess of papers until he finds his notes. He’s taken them meticulously on every book he’s read, trying to figure out what it is that’s been drawing on the Dark Lord’s magical core. He might be going out of his mind but he isn’t stupid. Voldemort didn’t take that book to do some light reading, there’s something in it that he doesn’t want Regulus to know. To have.

But what?

He drops onto the floor, spreading the pieces of parchment out in front of him and comparing the notes from every other book to the one the Dark Lord took. What was special about it? What did it have that none of the others did? What is Voldemort trying to hide? He runs through chapter names, through ingredient lists, through incantations. Matching them up line for line.

There is very little published about the Dark Arts, it’s a bit of a taboo area of interest. Much of the knowledge of the lore has been lost due to a reluctance to print it. Something his mother frequently laments. But it also means that there is a great deal of repetition in all the works Regulus has been reading. So whatever the Dark Lord is hiding, it ought to stand out.

He’s going through his copy of the book’s appendix when his attention catches on a single word;

Horcrux.

Something heavy drops into the pit of stomach as he starts shuffling through his other notes, checking all the other books, praying he finds a match, praying he can cross it off the list of

possibilities even though, the more he looks, the more certain he becomes that he won't be able to.

In all the research he's done over the past few weeks the only book that spoke about Horcrux's in any length was the book that the Dark Lord just snatched from his room.

The walls start to spin and Regulus braces himself against the floor, closing his eyes even though that just makes his sense of vertigo worse. He blames it on the potions and his lack of food and not the reality that is slowly settling around him. The truth that he isn't sure he can deny. It fits, fits with everything he's noticed in Voldemort over the past few weeks.

He's made a Horcrux. Made himself practically immortal. Anyone he goes up against will inevitably lose. And really it shouldn't matter, because they were always going to lose. Voldemort was always going to win. Regulus knew that. But he also thought that one day Voldemort would die.

And now...

PART II LILY

Lily loves Alice's flat. Red walls and velvet couches and vintage posters of pin-up girls who wink and blow kisses when you walk by. She has twinkly lights that, unlike the Muggle versions Lily grew up with, float along the ceiling uninhibited by cords and outlets. They look like fireflies. You can see pieces of Frank here and there—Quidditch magazines on the coffee table, alphabetized bookshelves filled with magic theory textbooks, a Chuddley Canons mug in the sink. But in reality, Alice fills the space—all warm and bold and comforting. Lily doesn't think Frank minds.

They're sitting on the shag carpet in the bedroom, bags of sweets spread around them, the record player on in the background. Marlene tears viciously into a gummy wand. "You think they'll call an election?" she asks, the serious nature of the question fully diminished by the half-chewed gummy in her mouth.

It's been a few weeks since Voldemort and his followers gained temporary control of the Ministry. It all ended very civilly. The next day there were even pictures in the Prophet of Voldemort and the Minister shaking hands. A compromise reached—all civic employees were now required to have pureblood status, any current employees failing to meet this criteria would be let go. A small price, the Prophet had said, for the avoidance of violence. The whole thing was being talked about like it was some kind of political negotiation and not a hostile takeover. It made Lily feel sick.

"Within the year," Mary says measuredly, watching her chocolate frog with vague interest as it hops around her palm. "He was supposed to be a hard-liner. Not very hard-line is it, giving into Voldemort's demands?"

"He's been in for a while now anyway hasn't he?" Lily asks, she has a vague memory of the last Wizarding election. She'd only been fifteen, not old enough to vote, it hadn't seemed that

important at the time.

Marlene shrugs, swallowing the rest of her jelly before she speaks this time. “I mean, not really. Loads of Ministers have stayed on for ten years or longer.”

Lily makes a face. She isn’t sure there’s a single politician in the Ministry right now that she wants to be stuck with for the next ten years. She’s about to say as much when Alice comes bouncing into the room with an arm full of bubblegum pink potions.

“I have them, I have them, I have themmmmm!!!” she sings, plopping down between Mary and Marlene and passing out the small glass vials.

Lily turns her’s over in her hand, the vibrant liquid inside hurting her eyes. “So how do these things work exactly?” she asks, shaking her potion.

“Well, you swallow it—”

“Usually a good place to start with a potion,” Mary says dryly.

Alice rolls her eyes and continues. “You swallow it, give it fifteen minutes, and then if your tongue turns green, it’s positive.”

“Huh,” Lily says, still inspecting the liquid. “So if you have a green tongue then you’re up the duff?”

Alice laughs. “Exactly.”

Mary nods at the potion in Marlene’s hands. “Something you wanna tell us Mar?”

The other girl rolls her eyes. “Oh what, like you’re expecting to be pregnant?”

“God no,” Mary makes a disgusted face. “But it’s certainly more of a possibility.”

“We’re doing this in solidarity,” Lily interrupts before the pair of them can get going, they’re honestly as bad as James and Sirius with their little quippy tangents. “Plus, I wanna see these things in action.”

Mary arches her brow. “You and Potter looking to start a little brood of your own?”

She snorts. “One day maybe, right now I’d rather live vicariously through Alice.”

“Ooh,” Alice shimmies her shoulders. “I do love being aspirational.”

“How accurate are these anyway?” Mary asks, holding her potion at eye level.

“A hundred percent, as long as they’re brewed correctly. Though you’re supposed to wait at least an hour or so after the deed is done in order to get an accurate reading, which is a bit of a drag.”

Lily and Mary both stare blankly at her.

“An hour after—“ Lily starts but isn’t quite able to finish the question.

“You mean to tell me,” Mary picks up where Lily leaves off. “That an hour after I fuck some dude this potion,” she holds up the little pink mixture, “will tell me if I’m pregnant?”

Both Marlene and Alice seem at a loss for why their friends are so caught up on this particular point.

“Yes?” Alice ventures finally.

“Holy shit.”

“God I love magic,” Mary laughs. “You got any spares lying around Longbottom? I could use these in my life.”

“Do Muggles not have a way to tell if you’re pregnant?” Marlene asks, sounding highly concerned.

“I mean they do,” Lily explains. “But not anything that can tell you right away.”

“How long do you have to wait?” Alice seems similarly concerned.

“I don’t know,” Lily looks at Mary who shrugs, “weeks, at least?”

“WEEKS?” Alice and Marlene demand in unison.

“And if you don’t want to go the hospital for it it’s a bloody pain to do at home,” Mary grumbles. “The kits are like a potions lessons. A lot of mixing things with urine.”

“WITH WHAT?”

Lily bites back a smile, leaning into Mary ever so slightly. “I think we might be traumatizing them,” she mock whispers.

“Wizards,” Mary sighs, “so delicate.”

“I’m sending you both home with a dozen of these,” Alice says indignantly. “That sounds completely barbaric.”

“I mean I’m not sure it’s barbaric, though it’s certainly inconvenient.”

“Also you are aware that we’re Witches right? We can buy our own potions?” Lily adds.

“Give them out to your Muggle friends then! They shouldn’t have to put up with this.”

“That’s definitely illegal,” Marlene chimes in.

“Though I do appreciate the sentiment,” Mary nudges Alice’s knee with her own. “And I’ll take you up on those dozen potions.”

“Done.”

“Speaking of potions,” Lily says, holding up the one in her hand. “Maybe we should take these, yeah? I wanna find out whether or not I’m going to be an auntie.”

“Yesssss,” Marlene drags out her “s”. “All I want is to be a cool aunt.”

Mary snorts. “You really think you’re going to be the cool aunt?”

“Oi!”

“To everyone being the cool aunt,” Lily uncorks her vial and lifts it into the centre of the circle.

“This might be my favourite toast ever,” Alice lifts her own potion happily.

“To spoiled brats,” Mary joins them.

Marlene rolls her eyes. “To adorable babies.”

Their potions clink together before each of them throws it back like a shot. The taste is vaguely sweet, almost like vanilla, but nothing too overpowering, and with the consistency of heavy cream.

“God I’m so glad that didn’t taste like bubblegum,” Mary says as she sets her empty vial down.

“It’s—“ Alice stretches, straining to see the clock on the wall. “Three-thirty now, so at three forty-five it’s tongues out.”

Marlene snorts, reaching for another gummy wand. “Tongues out,” she murmurs under her breath with amusement. “So,” Mary says, leaning back on her hand, “where is Frankfurt today?”

“Oh, he’s off visiting his mum. She’s been giving him a bit of a hard time about not coming by enough.”

Mary makes a face. “That woman is obsessed with him.”

“She’s his mum,” Lily laughs, picking through the bag of Bertie Botts for the best flavours. Cherry cheesecake is her favourite.

“She’s still obsessed with him,” Mary says undeterred, turning to Alice to back her up. “Am I wrong?”

“He’s her only son,” Alice waves her hand dismissively, “she’s just very...proud.”

“That house is a shrine to him.”

“Honestly, James’s house is kind of like that too,” Lily says before frowning—she’s just made the mistake of eating a cough syrup flavoured bean instead of a strawberry one. “Maybe it’s a Pureblood thing?”

“No, I’ve been to James’s house, it’s not the same.”

“Yeah I’ll give you that,” Alice concedes. “Augusta has really gone overboard with the photos and old broomsticks and trophies. It is a bit much.”

“What were you doing at Frank’s house anyway?” Marlene asks Mary around the wand in her mouth.

“He was trying to get rid of some old Quidditch gear, I went over to pick it up.”

Marlene groans, flopping down onto her back. “Merlin I miss Quidditch.”

“Yeah,” Mary agrees, sounding significantly more morose than she usually does. “Yeah me too.”

Something squirms in Lily’s stomach. The war moves so fast and takes up so much time that it’s easy to forget everything they’ve lost over the last few years. Everything they’ve had to let go of. And then, in the moments like this, moments of stillness. Of calm. It hits you like a brick wall.

“Okay, it’s three-forty-five, it’s time, it’s time!” Alice bounces around excitedly.

“Shall we do it on the count of three then?” Mary asks as Marlene pulls herself back up to sitting.

“Sounds good to me,” Lily agrees.

“No wait! Wait, wait, wait!” Alice puts her hands out, bracing herself against Mary and Marlene. “I can’t—I’m too nervous—can we just do it one at a time? Someone else go first?”

“I’ll go,” Marlene volunteers, straightening out her shoulders. “You lot ready?”

“On the edge of my seat,” Mary says dryly. “Can’t imagine what the results will be.”

Marlene glares at her. “Watch me be pregnant just to spite you.”

“That certainly would be magical.”

“Practically biblical,” Lily adds, earning her a smirk from Mary.

“Bibli—what?”

Mary waves her hand impatiently. “Just open your damn mouth already McKinnon.”

Rolling her eyes, Marlene does as she’s asked, sticking her tongue out an obscene amount. “Wha’ wolour wis bit?” Marlene asks.

“Pink,” Lily says.

“Definitely pink,” Mary agrees.

“Personally I think it’s more of a mauve,” Alice gets an exasperate sigh from Mary.

“Bummer,” Marlene closes her mouth. “I really was looking forward to having a spite baby.”

Mary throws a sugar quill at her that Marlene deftly avoids.

“Okay,” the blonde says, grinning. “Who’s next?”

There’s a beat of silence in which they all try not to look at Alice but inevitably end up doing it anyway.

“Guess it’ll be me then,” Mary says, when Alice very pointedly does not volunteer. A second later she’s sticking her tongue out.

“You’ve got a very average looking tongue there Macdonald,” Lily says. Mary shoves her.

“I’ve never had any complaints.”

“I’m sure you haven’t,” Lily gives her a smirk. “Well, I suppose I can—“ but Alice cuts her off.

“Okay, never mind,” she says a little flustered, colour high in her cheeks. “I lied, I can’t wait, I’ve gotta know,” she squeezes her eyes shut and for a minute they all just watch her and then —

“Oh my God!” Marlene gasps, hands flying to her mouth.

Alice’s eyes pop open and her mouth snaps closed. “Oh my God what? Oh my god what!”

Lily feels a whole mess of excited and shocked and happy. “It’s green—Alice it’s green.”

The other girl’s eyes grow to about twice their normal size. “What? Really?” But before any of them can answer she’s on her feet scrambling towards the bathroom, nearly tripping in her haste.

A few seconds later there’s a loud squealing noise and Alice is running back into the room. “It’s green!”

“We told y—oof” Mary says as she finds herself being tackled by a very excited Alice.

“It’s green! It’s green! It’s green!”

Lily throws herself into the mix as well, hugging Alice and Mary before Marlene drops on top of them, the four girls essentially dog-piling on the bedroom floor

“It’s green, it’s green, it’s green!” they start to chant with Alice.

“As happy as I am for you, would you lot mind getting off? I can’t bloody breathe,” Mary grumbles, and reluctantly, the three of them start untangling themselves.

“I’m having a baby,” Alice says to Lily, all dreamy eyed and sweet voiced. They’ve ended up sitting in front of each other on the floor.

“You’re having a baby,” Lily agrees, unable to keep the softness out of her voice. If anyone deserves to be parents it’s Alice and Frank.

Something flickers across Alice’s face then, the light in her eyes dimming as her brows draw together.

“What?” Lily asks. “Alice what is it?”

“I—“ the expression on her face grows more serious, eyes focused intently on Lily. “You never showed us your tongue.”

“What?” Lily laughs. “Not really important now is it?”

But the expression on Alice’s face doesn’t go away. “Lily—Lily open your mouth.”

“Alice it really doesn’t matter, c’mon.”

Alice shakes her head. “No, I think you should open your mouth.”

Still feeling thoroughly jarred by the turn in the conversation Lily nods, “Okay, sure, fine.” She sticks her tongue out and somehow the room goes silent.

It’s not as though it was all that loud to begin with but Marlene and Mary’s talking in the background, the movement, the laughter—everything stops.

“Lily,” Alice says delicately.

“What?” she asks, feeling her heart begin to speed up as she takes in the expressions on her friend’s faces and the sickening realization hits her. She begins to shake her head. “No,” she says firmly, eyes bouncing between the three of them. “No. No that’s not possible. That’s NOT possible. No, no, no,” and in a sick reenactment of the earlier moment of joy Lily finds herself scrambling to her feet and running to the bathroom.

Her reflection is wide-eyed and terrified when she finds it in the mirror, opening her mouth.

“Fuck,” she hisses, grabbing hold of the sink and dropping her head. “Fuck, fuck, fuck.” Pins and needles run up and down her arms and legs as her whole world seems to tilt.

“Lily?” It’s Alice, she stands next to her, hand on her lower back, Marlene and Mary lingering in the doorway. “Just breathe okay? We’re gonna figure this out.”

“It’s a mistake,” Lily says when she can speak again, looking pleadingly at her friend. “It has to be a mistake. I want to take another test, this can’t be right. We’re careful. We’re safe. I swear we are, I swear I am. I always am. This isn’t—this can’t be happening. I’m so careful.”

“I know sweetheart, I know. It’s going to be okay.”

“I want to take another test, I want to tak—this just can’t be right, it can’t be,” she squeezes her eyes shut. “It can’t, It can’t, it can’t.”

“The tests are a hundred percent effective I don’t think—“

“Mar,” Alice cuts her off. “Just go grab another one okay? Top shelf of the pantry is where I keep my potions, they’re all labelled,” Marlene doesn’t argue, quickly shutting her mouth and heading towards the kitchen. “Mary can you go get her some water please?”

Mary nods, giving Lily one last pitying look before following after Marlene.

“I’m going to be sick,” Lily mumbles. “Oh fuck I’m going to be sick,” she pushes away from Alice, dropping to her knees in front of the toilet and feeling the entire contents of her stomach crawling up her throat.

Alice ends up holding her hair back as she vomits, eventually collapsing back against the wall and drawing her knees up. I want my mum, she almost says.

I want my mum.

I want my mum.

I want my mum.

“Lily,” Alice’s hand is on Lily’s back, making slow circles.

“I can’t do this,” she croaks. “I just—“ her whole body is shaking. “I’m not you, I’m not ready.”

Alice is sitting crossed-legged next her, eyes all sympathy. “Lily, you don’t have to, you know that right?” she says steadily. “You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to. You say the word and you and I will go to St Mungos, there are—you have options.”

Lily keeps staring at her, trying to work through how she feels about that. She doesn’t know why it doesn’t fill her with instant relief. Why she isn’t pulling them off the floor and saying they should go.

The problem is,

she doesn’t want this now.

Not like this.

But she does want this.

“I don’t know,” she answers finally, voice thick. “I was supposed to have more time. I was supposed to be in control. I was supposed to decide when and how and with who. This was supposed to be good.”

Alice leans forward, her hand squeezing the back of Lily's neck, her forehead resting against Lily's temple. "I know babe, I'm sorry. Whatever you need I'm here okay? We're here."

Lily tries to even out her breathing, focusing on her inhales and exhales and nothing else. "Sorry," she says finally, "this is your moment and I'm kinda ruining it."

Alice laughs. "I can't tell you how much I don't give a fuck."

Lily laughs too, even if it's a little wet. A few seconds pass before she speaks again. "I'm scared," she whispers.

"I know," Alice says calmly. "But we'll figure this out okay? Whatever you decide you won't have to do any of it alone, I promise."

Now Lily thinks she really might cry, reaching out and grabbing her friend's hand, squeezing far more tightly than is strictly necessary.

"Thank you."

PART III JAMES

"What are we doing again?" Peter asks as they walk through rows of shinny Muggle cars, Sirius leading the way.

"Padfoot almost died and now he's having a midlife crisis," James explains, causing Sirius to bark out a laugh.

"Midlife crisis?" he throws over his shoulder. "You can't have much faith in my life expectancy then."

"Your shocking lack of a self-preservation instinct puts all bets on you dying young."

"You're one to talk."

"Don't know what you're referring to, I am an exceptionally level headed person."

"Yeah right," Peter says from behind him.

James reaches over and shoves Peter who shoves him right back. This is followed by a succession of pushing and hitting and attempted headlocks.

"Ah," Sirius sighs, interrupting their scuffle, "there she is."

"She?" Peter asks, sliding out from under James's arm, hands still held in a defensive position incase he decides to attack again. "Who's she?"

But Sirius is already walking away from them, throwing himself into the seat of a giant black motorcycle. I mean, alright, it might not be giant, but James has very limited experience with

Muggle vehicles and it certainly feels giant to him.

“Is that the she?” Peter asks.

James sends him a look before swiftly smacking the back of his head and walking off towards Sirius.

“Prick,” Peter murmurs behind him, glaring mutinously.

“So?” Sirius asks, hands on the handlebars, leaning back in his seat. “What do you think?”

James stares blankly at him. “Er—what do I think about what?”

“The bike—looks dead cool doesn’t it?” he grins, flexing his hands.

“Uh...” James looks to Peter for help but predictably the other boy only shrugs. Bloody useless. “Sure. But you aren’t going to...you know...you aren’t really thinking about buying it are you?”

“Absolutely I am,” Sirius says without a minutes hesitation.

“Is this why you didn’t bring Remus along?” Peter asks, looking at the motorbike like he’s worried it’s going to bite him.

“Remus is in a meeting with Moody,” Sirius says dismissively, only James doesn’t miss the tightening in his voice. Apparently, however, Peter does.

“Really? What for?”

James elbows him hard in the ribs.

“Ow, fuck, what the hell?” Peter demands.

“Ixnay on the questions-ay,” James says through clenched teeth, causing Sirius to roll his eyes.

“Real subtle Prongs, as always.”

“Subtlety is my middle name.”

“Like hell it is,” Peter mutters.

“Back to the bike!”

“Yeah, okay, the bike,” James rubs his neck. “Do you even know how to drive it?”

“Theoretically.”

Peter snorts, “That’s encouraging.”

Sirius sticks his tongue out at him.

“Are you going to get a license?”

Sirius and Peter both look at James.

“A license?” Sirius repeats.

“What’s a license?” Peter asks.

“Oh for—“ James cuts himself off, dislodging his glasses as he pinches the bridge of his nose. “A driver’s license? It proves that you can drive, all Muggles have to get one if they want to be on the road. Mary has one.”

Sirius screws up his face. “Well that’s ridiculous, we don’t need licences to fly.”

“Probably should considering the way some people go at it.”

“Fair point.”

Despite this potential roadblock Sirius does not seem at all deterred.

“Honestly, don’t think I’ll need one. Don’t intend to spend much time on the road anyway.”

“What’re you just going to buy it and stare at it?” James asks, wondering if maybe the fall from his broom actually did some lasting damage to Sirius’s head.

The other boy grins, mischief dancing in his eyes. “Nah, I’m gonna fly it.”

There’s a beat of silence in which both Peter and James simply stare at him. And then—

“Are you mental!” Peter demands. “That’s insane, you can’t fly something like this, it’s too big, it’ll get seen, the balance will be off.”

Sirius ignores Peter, eyes fixed on James who finds himself slowly mimicking his friend’s expression.

“You’re gonna charm it?” he asks.

“I’ve been looking up spells all week, I think we’ll have to combine one or two to have something strong enough to last for any significant amount of time but, it’s definitely doable.”

“I’m sorry ‘we’ll’ where did the ‘we’ come from. I don’t remember agreeing to this,” Peter blusters on.

James steps forward, crouching down by the bike to inspect the mechanics, the engine, brain now swirling with possibilities. “Don’t tell Moony I said this,” he looks up at Sirius. “But this might be the best idea you’ve ever had.”

Sirius laughs. “He’s not that scary y’know.”

“I beg to differ,” James says, running his fingers along the brake cables. “Plus, the rest of us don’t get a blow job after he finishes reaming us out.”

“Gross,” Peter says from behind him.

“Careful Prongs, or you’ll damage Peter’s delicate virginal sensibilities.”

James snorts.

“Oi! I’m not a virgin.”

“Sure Wormtail, whatever you say.”

“I am not!”

Sirius lets out a put upon sigh. “And we’re supposed to believe that you went and got laid and, what? Didn’t mention it?”

“I don’t tell you everything you know,” he says petulantly.

Sirius grins at him, sliding his dark sunglasses down off his head as the sun starts peaking through the clouds. They’re well into fall now, the sky almost always overcast, but Sirius never fails to bring those bloody glasses with him. The same way he wore his leather jacket in the summer. It’s his uniform. The way he wants the world to see him. The only way he knows who he is.

“I have a feeling,” Sirius goes on, “that this particular piece of information you would share.”

“I’ve had sex,” Peter maintains.

“When? With whomst?” Sirius prods, causing James to sigh, pulling his attention away from the bike.

“Leave him alone Sirius,” he says.

“I’m just curious! I mean, we know he wasn’t shagging anyone in school—“

“Hey, I did...stuff...in school!” Peter says indignantly, arms crossing over his chest.

Sirius, who is having far too much fun poking him, is practically beaming at this point.

“Stuff? I mean, I’m sure even Snivellus was doing stuff, but that’s still not the same as fucking someone.”

“That doesn’t mean anything, James wasn’t shagging anyone in school either!” Peter says defensively, which James, quite frankly, doesn’t appreciate at all, having no desire to start picking apart his own sex life. Especially considering...well...

“What exactly do you think him and Lily were doing at the end of seventh year?”

James almost lets out a sigh of relief, though he shouldn't be surprised that Sirius is completely skipping over Regulus. It's not exactly his favourite topic.

Peter looks genuinely shocked by this insinuation. "What? No way! With Lily? Lily had sex with you in school?"

Now both his friend's are staring at him and James's dislike of this conversation grows immensely. "Er—yeah?"

Peter shakes his head, looking like his world has just been turned upside down. "I didn't think—she just seems like the type to wait."

James had no idea Peter had put so much thought into his girlfriend's sexual history.

"I mean," he goes on, thoroughly uncomfortable. "I wasn't exactly her first."

Peter's eyes grow large. "Really? Are they all like that d'you reckon? Mu—Muggle-borns?"

Now James is starting to get offended. "Like what?"

"Well, y'know, like Mary."

"Oi!" Sirius interjects. "What are you trying to say about Mary?"

"Nothing, nothing just," Peter wobbles his head from side to side. "Well you know she...she gets around a bit doesn't she?"

"There isn't anything wrong with that," James says emphatically.

"I mean..."

"There isn't. Anything. Wrong with that."

Peter looks thoroughly uncomfortable. "No, I know, I know, it's just...I mean, you're not going to marry a girl like that are you?"

"What year are you living in exactly Pete?" James asks, thoroughly thrown by this whole conversation.

The other boy sighs. "I just think family is important and the person you bring into it, or make one with, should be...pure."

"Pure?" Sirius repeats coldly.

"You know what I mean," Peter waves his hands around in exasperation.

"I promise you I don't mate," James says.

Peter's cheeks have flushed and he's stopped making eye contact. "Never mind, I don't know why I thought you guys would... anyway, I'm not a virgin."

“Well bully for you,” Sirius says sardonically. “Welcome to the little slut club with the rest of us pre-marital sex having heathens—Jesus Christ Peter,” Sirius shakes his head. “Sometimes you sound like my fucking mother.”

Peter’s face drains of colour and James is about to suggest a change in topic when a man in a horrendous beige suit, bellbottom pants, and a receding hairline walks up to them.

“Hello lads, how’re you liking my bike?” he grins, teeth far too white to be natural. In fact, James almost feels he needs to look away.

“She’s perfect,” Sirius says, the smile returning to his own face. “I’ll take her.”

“Lily?” James calls out as he kicks the door closed behind him, dropping his keys into the bowl by the front door. “Lily?” her shoes are lying in a heap at the bottom of the stairs and he thinks he can hear music coming from above him.

They’ve officially given up their flat in London, boxes now filling the rooms of his childhood home. Half of it is stuff they haven’t unpacked, and the other half is stuff they’re putting away. The parts of his parents that have to move to make room for them. For a while he wasn’t sure if he could keep the pictures up—if he could look at their smiling faces and not instantly want to curl in on himself and fall apart. But it felt worse, when they weren’t there, and gradually, the pictures have started to become more of a comfort than a hurt.

He jogs up the stairs, the music definitely coming from their bedroom. “Lils?” when James opens the door he finds Lily on the floor, she’s taken the duvet off the bed and wrapped it around herself, her record player going off in the background.

She’s looking at the ceiling, flat on her back, face only barely poking through the blankets. “Hi,” she says in a small voice.

“Hey, woah, what’s wrong?” James walks into the room, dropping down onto the floor next to her, crossing his legs. Her eyes and nose are a little red, her freckles stark against her pale skin. After a few seconds Lily rolls towards him, onto her side, into a sort of fetal position.

“I have to tell you something.”

James feels his chest grow tight but he tries not to panic, sliding down onto the floor and mirroring her position. “Okay,” he says softly, reaching out to cup her face, thumb brushing her cheek. “You have my undivided attention.”

She smiles weakly, the expression wobbling at the edges. James wonders, for one fleeting panicked moment, if this is her breaking up with him. He knows he hasn’t been the easiest since his parents died. Knows he’s asked a lot of her. He’s not sure how he’ll manage if she finishes with him. Not sure there’ll be any getting over it.

When Lily continues to remain silent James decides to push. “I thought you were going to Alice’s?”

She nods. “I—yeah. I did.”

“And something...happened?” he guesses, unable to figure out what it could possibly be.

The wobbly smile makes a return. “Yeah,” she says. And then. “Alice is pregnant.”

Despite the anxiety currently bubbling up inside him James can’t help but smile. “No way, that’s amazing!”

“It is,” Lily agrees, though there’s something off about her voice. About her expression. Now James is well and truly lost.

“But something else happened?”

She nods again and then sighs heavily.

“James,” she says his name pleadingly and he doesn’t understand why. Because he’s right there. She doesn’t need to beg. Hell, she doesn’t even need to ask. He’ll always be right there. “James I’m pregnant.”

He blinks.

“What?”

I mean, he heard the words but—

“What? No. I—no way you can’t, that doesn’t—no. I mean, right? That’s not, not possible? Right?” He doesn’t even know what he’s saying, his brain feels like it’s gone numb, unable to process this information. To properly grasp it.

Lily lets out a shaky breath. “Turns out it is possible.”

“You’re sure?” because James definitely isn’t, not that he really knows much about pregnancy or babies or any of that stuff if he’s being honest.

“I took three tests at Alice’s,” she laughs humourlessly. “Alice even went out to Diagon and bought me a fresh one incase the first two were from a bad batch,” she looks at him straight on, unwavering. “I’m pregnant James.” Holy shit.

Holy shit.

Holy shit.

Holy shit.

James sits up, bending his knees and dropping his head between them. He’s definitely hyperventilating, lungs rejecting the air as soon as he sucks it in.

Holy shit.

Holy shit.

Holy shit.

He feels Lily sit up too, feels her hand rubbing circles into his back.

“Sorry,” he says between gasps. “Sorry I’ll—I just need—a minute.”

“It’s fine, I threw up when I found out so you’re not even close to being on my level.”

James manages a choked laugh at that. He focuses on Lily’s hand, on her touch, the warmth of it and the steadiness, even though he knows she’s freaking out too. It takes a few minutes, but eventually he’s able to get his breathing back to something that resembles a regular pace.

He gives himself another minute before turning to Lily. The blanket has fallen away from her head, spooling around her shoulders, revealing a mess of staticky ginger hair.

“What—I mean—what do we do?” he asks, hoping she has some kind of answer because he sure as hell doesn’t.

Lily sighs, pulling her hand away from his back and scrubbing at her face. “I don’t know, I—the responsible thing is to,” she swallows, “is to get rid of it.”

“Oh,” James says, he hadn’t really thought of that but yes, of course, that makes sense.

“Okay.”

“Okay?” Lily asks, something tight in her voice.

“I don’t know you said that was the responsible thing to do, I don’t—is that not—what do you want?” he should probably answer that question for himself but he’s honestly still struggling to fully accept this. That this is real life and not some very very stressful dream. He can’t conceptualize that there’s a baby growing inside Lily. Or that it’s his. Or that it could be born and have a face and fingers and thoughts of its own. That reality is too big.

“The responsible thing to do is get rid of it,” she repeats. “We’re—we’re too young and we’re not ready and we haven’t even been together that long, not to mention we’re in the middle of a bloody war,” she runs a hand through her hair, “The responsible thing to do is get rid of it.”

“Right,” James says, not knowing if he’s supposed to be giving feedback at this point but feeling that he needs to at least let her know that he’s listening.

“But,” Lily’s voice cracks, and she looks away, looks up at the ceiling, blinking the moisture from her eyes. “But I just keep thinking—keep thinking,” she laughs wetly, “what if they’re a Quidditch player.”

“Oh,” James says for the second time, the entire contents of his chest lurching.

Eventually Lily brings her gaze back down, eyes still wet. “You know?”

He nods, because he does. He does know. And suddenly James feels an overwhelming swell of emotion hit him. For Lily. For the life they have. For the life they could have.

“I—“ he starts and then stops, having to clear his throat before he continues. “I want this.” Lily’s eyes grow wide. “If you want this,” he goes on. “I want this.”

For a minute she just stares at him, terrified, and then, slowly, she nods. “I want this,” she whispers, like maybe she thinks she’s not allowed to. And finally the tears spill down her cheeks and James pulls her in, wrapping her in his arms and feeling her burrow against his chest.

He kisses the top of her head before he laughs. “Fuck.”

“Yeah,” Lily agrees, words slightly muffled. It’s a few seconds before she speaks again. “I’m glad it’s...I’m glad it’s with you,” she says, making James’s heart flip. He squeezes her a little tighter.

“Yeah,” he murmurs into her hair. “Yeah I’m glad it’s you too.”

PART IV SIRIUS

Sirius is whistling when he gets home, carelessly throwing his jacket over the sofa and heading for the kitchen.

“Hey, you’re back,” he smiles at Remus who is sat at the table, some terribly thick and boring looking book in front of him.

“Hi,” Remus says a little hesitantly, as Sirius brushes past him to the fridge, pulling out a beer and twisting off the cap.

“How was Moody then?” he asks, leaning back against the counter and taking a drink.

“Fine. Y’know, as pleasant as ever.”

Sirius grins. “Regular ray of sunshine he is.”

He can feel Remus looking him over. “You’re in a good mood,” he says finally.

Sirius’s grin only widens. “I am. Listen, don’t freak out, but I’ve bought a motorbike.”

Remus, much to Sirius’s surprise, doesn’t freak out. In fact, he barely reacts at all. Which is when Sirius notices the tension in Remus’s shoulders, in his face. He feels his smile slip. “What is it?”

Remus grimaces. “I’m—I’m leaving again. For a bit.”

Sirius’s whole body goes stiff. “Ah,” he says, placing his beer down on the counter with more force than is strictly necessary. “Well, I must have done something right, to earn the privilege of being told in person this time.”

Remus doesn’t bother trying to hide his flinch.

Sirius does the math quickly in his head. “Another full moon,” he says.

Remus nods, looking at the floor or the table, but certainly not at Sirius.

“Werewolves then,” the words tasting all wrong in his mouth. “This—this task Dumbledore has given you, this place you disappear to, it has to do with werewolves?”

“Sirius,” Remus says, in a tone that suggests that this is not going to be a fruitful direction for the conversation to go in.

“Yeah, right, sorry, top secret and all that. Wouldn’t want to let anything slip,” he picks up his beer again but finds he doesn’t want it anymore, chucking it in the sink before dropping into one of the available kitchen chairs, arms crossed over his chest.

The silence seems to stretch on forever but Sirius isn’t about to be the one to break it. Especially since he’s not sure he can trust himself to say anything pleasant right now.

“Are you—“ Remus eventually starts and then stops, face screwing itself up in frustration. “Are you going to be...hanging out...with Mary.”

The question catches Sirius completely off guard, Remus still not looking at him. They haven’t talked about what happened with Mary. About the kiss. Not that they ever talk about the things they should. Sirius feels a tidal wave of shame rise up in him.

“I—“ he clears his throat. He knows what the real question is here. Knows it has nothing to do with hanging out with Mary. “No. I’m not—no.” He grits his teeth.

He needs to say more. He does. But apologies have always been difficult for him. Difficult when coming from a house where “sorry” was nothing but another way for his mother to humiliate him. To force him to his knees. To make him beg. He’s never quite managed one without a bad taste being left in his mouth.

Eventually he reaches out, hand wrapping around Remus’s wrist and tugging, until, rolling his eyes, Remus allows himself to be pulled out of his seat and into Sirius’s lap. It isn’t exactly the most comfortable position, but it allows Sirius to burry his face in the crook of Remus’s neck. To bask in the heat of him. The weight. And like this. Like this it’s almost bearable.

“I’m sorry.”

Sirius kisses his shoulder right after and he barely tastes the humiliation at all. Remus is silent for a while, but he has his arms wrapped around Sirius and he considers that a win.

“I need us to be in this together,” Remus finally says, voice soft. “It’s too fucking painful being in it alone.”

Sirius squeezes his eyes shut for a minute, glad that Remus can’t see his face, can’t see the things those words do to him. He bites the crook of Remus’s neck and is rewarded with a huff.

“We are,” Sirius says finally. “I promise we are.”

He feels Remus nod, hair tickling his cheek.

“When do you have to leave?”

“Tomorrow morning.”

It’s Sirius’s turn to nod, and then, in the next second, he’s getting to his feet and taking Remus with him.

“What the fuck—Sirius—Oh for Merlin’s—put me down you lunatic!”

Sirius has managed to get Remus at least partially over his shoulder. He’s very limb-y and the task of carrying him isn’t made any easier by his squirming.

“Put me down! Sirius—you’re ridiculous you know that?”

Somehow Sirius manages to wrangle him into the bedroom, dropping him a little bit clumsily onto the bed, Remus laughing despite himself.

Sirius kisses him then, the way he used to dream about before kissing Remus Lupin was something he was allowed to do. Before it was something he allowed himself to want. He lays himself bare in that kiss, cuts himself open. It is all tenderness and longing. It is all love, love, love. Sirius never seems to be able to speak all the sweet nice words that lovers are supposed to. But he could write sonnets with his lips.

He wants Remus to know.

To understand.

That he never could have kissed Mary like this.

There are hands and teeth and nails. Spit and curses and heavy breathing. And I’m sorry’s. And I’m scared’s. And don’t leave’s. Those are the kisses that last the longest. That hit the hardest. That linger even after they are spent and sweaty and lying in one another’s arms.

Sirius wakes up to a dark room and the dreamy feeling of fingers in his hair.

“Hmm,” he hums happily, still caught between wakefulness and sleep. “I love when you do that.”

He can hear the smile in Remus’s voice. “Yeah, I know.”

Sirius blinks his eyes open, looking up to find Remus sitting on the edge of the bed, fully dressed.

“I have to go,” Remus says regretfully.

Sirius doesn't know what his face does, too sleepy to be guarded.

"I know," Remus sighs, hand sliding down from Sirius's hair to cup his cheek, thumb running along Sirius's bottom lip. "I love you."

In response Sirius turns his head and kisses Remus's palm, eyes already drooping closed despite his best efforts. In the distance he hears Remus's quiet laugh.

The next time Sirius wakes up the flat is empty.

Chapter End Notes

Hello beautiful people!

Listen, a Jegulus reunion will happen. I promise you. I'm officially calling this fic a reverse slow-burn, like they get together fast, but they come back together slow.

I also just want to say that I am so overwhelmingly touched by the amount of support I received after the last chapter. It means so much, and some of those comments were just so thoughtful, and I promise I'm going to try and respond to them (I thought I would get through my messages on Tumblr first but it turns out that is taking longer than I thought). I also just want to make sure it's clear that criticism of this fic is totally valid so please don't feel like you have to defend it and especially don't, y'know, attack anyone who is offering up their opinion on it it's totally their right to do so and I 100% support that.

Okay, as always thank you all so much for hanging around and reading, and being your lovely selves, I read all the comments (even if I suck at replying) and appreciate them so yeah, hope you're having a great day!

Chapter 49

Chapter Summary

Welcome to Lupercal

Chapter Notes

tw Violence

tw Brief mention of suicide

tw Death (NOT main character, can't stress this enough, don't freak out, Regulus very much does not die in this chapter)

Oh yeah, and this definitely fucks with canon, I'm not sure specifically how, but definitely somewhere canon was fucked

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The sun is barely kissing the horizon as Remus jogs down the street, clutching his canvas duffle bag to his side. It's cold this morning, his cheeks rosy, fingers going a little numb. The rusted blue Volkswagen Camper in front of him honks encouragingly as he hears the side door banging open.

"You're late!" a voice shouts, echoing in the empty street, scaring the pigeons.

Remus huffs the last few feet to the car, grabbing the roof and swinging himself inside. "I'm-not-late," he manages between breaths, sliding into his seat. Someone else shuts the door. Remus flashes his watch at the driver with a grin. "See, six AM, on the dot. I'm very literally on time."

The old man rolls his eyes, turning back to face the road. He's balding on the top of his head, with a thick auburn beard covering his face. "Cheeky," he mutters, eyes finding Remus in the rearview mirror, unable to hide his amusement as he pulls away from the curb.

Remus settles, nodding at the other six passengers in the camper. He's seen a few of them on his other visits but there's at least two of them that are new faces—new to him anyway. None of them talk, it's too early, Remus turning his head towards the window and watching the sky light up as the day slowly creeps in and they leave the city behind. Buildings and cars turn into fields and endless motorways, the early morning sun sparkling against the asphalt.

The first time he'd come up, he'd done it on his own. He had to take a train and then a bus, and then walk for about two miles. By the time he saw the sign his feet were killing him.

"Looks like you're planing to stay a while."

It takes Remus a moment to realize Arnold—the driver—is talking to him. He blinks, still half-asleep, looking down at the bag in his lap. After a few seconds he shrugs.

"Might be, never know, wanted to...keep my options open I suppose," he tries to give the old man a smile that doesn't betray any of the feelings swirling around inside of him.

"Options huh?" Arnold asks, nodding. "Well, I know plenty of the folks up there will be happy to hear that."

"I'm not promising anything though, so don't go gossiping," Remus says, only half joking.

Arnold laughs, it's a deep noise, coming right from his belly. Like Santa Clause. "No, you don't strike me as the type who makes many promises."

Remus chews on the inside of his lip to stop himself from grimacing, turning back towards the window. Little does Arnold know, Remus actually makes promises all the time, he just isn't particularly good at keeping them.

On his first visit things went wrong almost immediately. After the two mile walk he came to a painted wooden sign that read "Lupercal" at the top of a dirt road, bordered on either side by thick woods. Somewhere, at the end of this road, there was supposedly an old farm house that Remus was meant to find.

Moody had specifically told him not to make first contact on the full moon, he figured it would be safer, and Remus couldn't say that he disagreed. See, Lupercal is the largest group of werewolves all living in one place that the Ministry has ever been aware of. Moody refers to them as the "Pack" but Remus can't quite get over the discomfort that leaves him with. It makes it feel too much like they're discussing animals.

"Sandwich?"

Remus turns to see the man next to him, who'd been asleep the last time Remus checked, offering him a Tupperware full of what appear to be ham and cheese sandwiches. Remus is going to refuse but he didn't have time to eat before he left and even just the mention of food has his stomach grumbling.

"Thanks," he gives in, reaching out and taking a quarter.

The man smiles. He's one of the people Remus doesn't recognize. He looks like he might be close to thirty, with freckles speckling his face.

"No problem. I always try to share, y'know? Put that energy out into the universe, incase one day I need someone to return the favour."

This kind of attitude, Remus has learned, is actually quite common amongst werewolves. He supposes it comes from living such unpredictable lives—being fired or evicted whenever their truth is discovered. Relying heavily on the charity of strangers and friends. There's no such thing as stability when you're a werewolf. Well, unless you have the good fortune of sitting in a train compartment with James Potter and Sirius Black one day.

"We're about to pass the last Petrol station for a while you lot," Arnold calls back to them. "If anyone needs a wee speak now."

There's some laughter, but no requests are made.

"Going once, going twice—" they speed past the station in a blur of colour. "Gone."

"I thought it was supposed to be "sold" not gone?" someone from the back heckles.

"Do I look like a fucking auctioneer McDavid?"

"Is that a rhetorical question?"

There's more quiet laughter, all of them turning back to their books or naps, or thoughts.

When Remus finally saw the farm house for the first time it was from a distance, down that dirt road, trees still blocking parts of it from view. It had been a sunny afternoon, not a cloud in sight, and while Remus had been nervous his guard had, admittedly, been down somewhat. And that's when he'd heard it.

Growling.

The hair on the back of his neck had stood up even while his brain screamed "no, no it's not possible". And yet, despite everything reason told him, when he turned his head the impossible had been right there.

Two glowing yellow eyes, staring out at him from between the trees.

The shock had paralyzed him, unable to move, to think, to grab his wand, as he stared into the face of a werewolf. A fully transformed werewolf. In the middle of the day. Weeks away from the full moon. Remus simply couldn't process a single part of that. And then, a second later, he felt claws and teeth sinking into his skin.

The wolf threw them into the trees on the other side of the road, branches and bushes whipping against Remus's back with such force they shredded his shirt. He had wondered, in a very detached way, if there was some sort of poetic irony in him dying at the hands of a werewolf.

He isn't sure how long it went on for, the wolf tearing him apart, Remus trying and failing to fight back. But eventually he heard a voice. Shouting somewhere in the distance. And then a howl. The wolf stopped, leaving Remus just floating there in the darkness, barely conscious. Eventually the weight on top of him disappeared, and the last thing he remembers before he slipped away completely, is the feel of a wet nose pressing against his cheek.

He was unconscious for three days after that.

“Here we are,” Arnold says as he turns down that same dirt road, past the sign and through the trees.

Remus generally rather likes this drive. It’s scenic. Calming. This bit though, right at the end, still makes his stomach drop. Phantom claws prickling his skin.

The main building at Lupercal is a large, ancient looking farm house. Wide, two stories tall, made of grey stone with rows of windows and a thatched roof. The lawn in front is luscious and green, some of the kids running around.

“Alright, get gone you lot, I have a busy schedule,” Arnold says as he parks the camper at the end of the drive.

“Thanks Arnold,” Remus says as he slides out of the car.

“See you soon Lupin, or maybe not so soon huh?” Remus sends him a look that has Arnold holding his hands up in surrender. “I know, I know, no promises,” he winks.

Remus adjusts the strap of his bag over his shoulder, the other travellers breaking off, some heading up towards the main house, others off towards the barn that’s also been converted into a living space. Remus has only just looked up when the front door flies open and a beaming face looks right at him.

“Remus!” the boy shouts, jogging down the front lawn towards him and pulling him into a hug without a second thought.

“Oof,” it takes him a minute, but eventually Remus hugs him back. “Hey Gabe.”

The other boy pulls away but keeps his hands on Remus’s shoulders. “You came.”

Moody hadn’t exactly given him much of a choice on the matter. But the truth is, even if he had had a choice, Remus probably still would have come. He thinks of Sirius back in their flat, alone in their bed, and barely suppresses a wince.

“I told you I would,” he says finally.

Gabe grins. “You did.”

Gabe is the opposite of Remus in every way, at least physically. He’s shorter, muscular, with brown skin and a shaved head, tattoos snaking up his arms.

“Where the hell are your clothes Gabe?” Remus asks, as the pair heads towards the house.

“I’m pretty sure I’m dressed.”

“You don’t have any sleeves.”

“Observant of you.”

“It’s October.”

“And he knows the date, gosh you are very impressive Remus Lupin. You really are.”

Remus sighs. He’s not sure what he did to piss the universe off so much that it decided to fill his life with nothing but sarcastic bastards, but he is more than willing to perform some sort of ritual sacrifice to make it end.

“Well look who it is!” A girl with strawberry blonde hair comes around the corner, in ripped jeans and a Muggle band shirt. She hugs him too. Everyone here is very hug-y. Remus does his best to be accommodating.

“Hey Ava,” he says, when she pulls away.

“I see this one’s already all over you,” she rubs the top of Gabe’s head.

“Oh fuck off,” Gabe pinches her side and she laughs, the three of them walking up the front steps and into the house.

The inside is warm, there’s no other way to describe it. Walls covered in finger paintings and photos—Muggle photos—all of the furniture well loved. The sound of singing drifts towards them from the kitchen.

“Oi mum,” Gabe says as they walk towards the noise. “The city slickers are here.”

Remus rolls his eyes. Having grown up where he did he’ll never be able to think of himself as a Londoner, but then, he’s not about to tell Gabe that.

Mia is standing in the kitchen by the sink, a small girl in her arms. Well, Remus says small. She must be five or six, too old, he would have thought, to be held the way she is. Remus runs through all the kids he met last time but he can’t place her.

“Ah Remus, lovely to see you again,” Mia says with a smile, attention quickly hopping back to Gabe. “Can I get you to run to the barn and bring this to Harper? She’s still not feeling well,” she gestures to the covered dishes on the counter.

“Yeah, ‘course,” Gabe squeezes Remus’s arm as he goes by, grabbing, what Remus can only assume is food, and heading out the back door towards the barn.

“Put your bag down Remus, take a seat, take a seat, do you want tea?” Mia asks, blowing a strand of brown hair from her face, still bouncing the little girl on her hip.

“Uh, sure I—“

A shriek sounds from the front room, followed by loud whining; “William that’s mineeee!”

Mia rolls her eyes. “Ava do you mind—“

“On it chief,” she gives Mia a two fingered salute before sending Remus a look, like he’s in on some sort of joke. Like she’s known him for years and not months.

“Sit, sit,” Mia says again. “Tea, yes?”

“Er,” he laughs a little, dropping his bag on the ground and taking a seat at the rickety wooden table that looks like it’s half covered in various art projects. “Yeah—yes, please. Tea would be great, thank you.”

“Lovely, do you mind holding Charlotte while I get it?” she asks while simultaneously transferring the little girl into Remus’s somewhat hesitant arms. “She’s nervous about being on her own at the moment,” Mia says as she sets the kettle on the stove.

The little girl doesn’t even bat an eye at being handed off to a stranger, instantly hiding her face in Remus’s shoulder. She’s heavy and warm and soft and he’s almost positive he is not responsible enough to be holding her.

“How’ve you been then?” Mia asks, pulling a pair of mugs from the cupboard. One of them appears to be in the shape of a panda head.

“I’ve been, y’know, I’ve been fine.” There’s only so much he can tell. It’s not that he hasn’t said anything about himself, I mean, they know his name. Know who his father is. But they don’t know that he was sent here by Alastor Moody. That he’s meant to report back; what they’re doing and thinking and saying. Who they’re talking to. If they’ve had any contact with Death Eaters. As far as anyone at Lupercal is aware, Remus heard a rumour about this place and decided to check it out for himself.

“You don’t sound fine,” Mia shoots him a knowing look over her shoulder. “You sound miserable.”

He can’t help but laugh. She’s not wrong. Not exactly. The little girl in his arms squirms.

“You’re too young to be miserable Remus,” she leans back against the counter, waiting for the water to finish boiling. “You oughta be having fun.”

He smiles grimly back at her. “Bit hard...under the circumstances.”

“Hmm,” she says, unconvinced. “But are you even trying?”

Remus blinks, opening and then closing his mouth. All things considered, it’s an entirely unfair question. It’s not as though he can just decide to stop the war. But, I mean, is he trying to be anything but miserable? No, not really. He’s mostly just, accepted it...seems like the easiest option.

Luckily he’s saved from having to answer by the screaming of the kettle. “Ah,” Mia says, turning to lift it off the heat, “hold that thought.”

The girl in Remus’s arms makes an unhappy noise, the first noise, in fact, that he’s heard her make this whole time. Wriggling again, adjusting herself on his lap. He looks down at her and feels his whole body go cold.

In her adjusting her shirt has slipped slightly down her shoulder. And there, brazen against her skin, is a large, angry bite mark. It’s healed but not scarred yet. Meaning it can’t be more

than a few days old. Remus can't look away, he wants to, desperately, but he just...he thinks he might be shaking.

A little boy sleeping in his bedroom.

Claws scraping on hardwood floors.

Teeth and Teeth and Teeth.

"Remus? Remus?"

He blinks, finally forcing himself to look up, finding Mia at the table, tea forgotten, the expression on her face telling him this isn't the first time she's said his name. He opens his mouth to try to explain but finds that he can't.

She doesn't seem to need him to. "Ava?" she calls out.

"Yeah?" comes her voice from down the hall.

"Can you come take Charlotte for a minute please?" she never takes her eye off of Remus. He can hear the sound of Ava's footsteps on the old floorboards.

"Of course I can," she says as she slips into the room. Remus sees the moment she registers something is wrong, eyes bouncing between him and Mia. He's worried she's going to ask for an explanation but instead she just puts on her little kid voice; "Okay darling, you're coming with me, lets go wrangle those big kids huh?" she takes her easily from Remus's arms, which barely even seem to be working at the moment.

He watches Mia nod to her, listens to the footsteps again, this time disappearing into the distance. And then Mia is sitting in front of him, her face level with Remus's.

"I'm okay," he chokes out.

A sad smile pulls at her mouth. "Oh honey, you are the farthest thing from okay."

Remus isn't sure he thinks that's fair but he lets it slide. "She wasn't here the last time I was," he finally manages, unsure if it's even what he means to say.

There are a few seconds of stillness before Mia nods. "No, she wasn't."

Remus's chest feels tight. "Greyback?"

"Or one of his supporters."

Remus doesn't think he hides his disgust. Or his fear. He'd been surprised by the number of kids here the last time he visited. He'd always thought that he was a bit of an anomaly, targeted because of his father's work. He hadn't realized that Greyback had made it his mission to turn as many children as he could get his hands on.

"Her parents?"

Mia sighs, “Same old story, they don’t know what to do with her, don’t know how to handle it. They’re afraid.”

“They’re afraid?” Remus demands. “How do they think she feels?”

She offers him a sad smile. “I expect they try very hard not to think about it.”

Gabe was the first kid Mia ever took in. Remus found that out last time. After she’d been turned Mia lived out here on her own, something of a hermit. Until one day she got an owl from an old friend working at St Mungos. It said a little boy had been left, abandoned actually, at the hospital’s front door. A werewolf bite on his stomach.

“So when you say she’s nervous...” Remus pushes, staring down the hall like he can still see Charlotte.

“She was attacked playing alone in her back garden, she starts panicking if you put her down for too long, poor thing. Thinks something is coming to get her.”

After Gabe, Mia told the friend to let her know anytime someone came in with a bite or symptoms. She wanted to help. To offer people like her a safe place, if they needed it. She had been just as surprised as Remus to discover so many of those people were children.

“Will they come back?” Remus asks finally, after a long pause. “Her parents?”

“They might, they do sometimes, once they’ve adjusted, wrapped their minds around it. Mourned the life they thought they would have.”

Remus can’t help but think of his own parents. Can’t help but be grateful for them. For all of Lyall Lupin’s faults, he hadn’t left his son on the hospital’s doorstep, and Remus supposes that counts for something.

“Sometimes they come back,” Mia goes on when Remus doesn’t. “But sometimes...”

Gabe comes bounding through the back door, cheeks flushed from the run over to the barn, smile on his face as it almost always is. “Ooh tea,” he says, reaching for one of the abandoned mugs on the counter. “Brilliant.”

Remus has the same bedroom he did last time, in the loft of the barn. It’s small, with a single bed and plain wooden dresser. The roof is slanted so he has to duck down in some spots, and there’s a circular window on the outside wall. There are several rooms like this at Lupercal, for people like him, who come only around the full moon, so that they can have a safe place to transform, away from their towns and cities. It’s far better than being locked in a cell at the Ministry. Or at least that’s what Remus has been told, he himself has been spared that particular indignity.

That’s where Arnold comes in. Driving the shuttle around to the areas surrounding Lupercal and picking up anyone who wants to come. Last time, Remus’s first time meeting Arnold, he’d asked him why he did it. It takes at least two or three days to pick up everyone, a rather

monotonous task, and it's not as though he's getting paid. It had taken Arnold a while to answer, before finally he'd simply said: "Sometimes all you need is one person to show up. To be there. Even if it's just the man driving the camper van."

Remus wanted to know more about Arnold. About how he'd met Mia, how he'd ended up living here, how he was bitten in the first place. But he refrained. Moody had warned him about coming on too strong. Not that he was as concerned with collecting information as he was with satisfying his own curiosity. He'd never seen another werewolf in real life before, well, besides Greyback. Not until the day he'd turned his head and found those glowing yellow eyes staring at him between the trees.

Suffice to say, on his first visit, he hadn't had the chance to ask many questions. Nor had he had his own bedroom. He'd woken up in Mia's bed. Disoriented and frightened and in nearly unbearable pain. He had never before been forced to endure injury without magic. Never had to let a wound heal on its own or a bone mend the slow way that Muggles do. Never had to feel any of it for longer than it took to unstopper a pain potion. But he had learned quickly that magic is not common at Lupercal.

There's a knock on the door.

"You decent?" Gabe calls through, causing Remus to snort.

"What exactly would I be doing right now that would make me indecent?"

The other boy shrugs as he slides into the room, hands in his pockets. "Never know, better not to assume though 'innit?"

"Very considerate of you."

Gabe's smile hangs recklessly in his mouth. "I do my best." He reminds Remus of Sirius and he doesn't at the same time. Because the truth is, no one is Sirius Black. No one comes close. But there are moments, moments when he almost feels like the universe is teasing him.

"Hello? Earth to Remus?" Gabe waves his hand in front of Remus's face, snapping him awake.

"Sorry," Remus blinks, rubbing at his eyes, "long day. What did you say?"

Gabe gives him a funny look but doesn't pry. "Dinner's ready, c'mon, chop chop."

"Right," Remus gives him a slight smile as he gets off the bed.

At Lupercal everyone always eats dinner together. Mia's rules. "Like a family" Remus had remarked last time, causing her to correct him. "Not like. We are a family."

"So," Gabe says as they make their way across the lawn, sun dripping low over their heads, making the sky a milky orange and pink colour. It really is beautiful out here. "I noticed you brought a bigger bag this time."

Remus's stomach clenches. When he thinks hard enough he can still feel the soft warmth of Sirius in their bed. "I did."

Gabe just nods for a minute, and Remus wonders if he'll let it drop. "You staying then? Longer I mean?"

Remus doesn't know how to answer that question. Moody would certainly like him to. Perhaps more frightening, is that part of Remus would too. "I'm...thinking about it."

"Right," there's another pause and then. "But theoretically, if you were going to stay longer, how long would longer be?"

Remus sighs. "You just want me to stay because you're bored."

Gabe blows out his lips like a horse. "Please. Me? Bored? How could I be bored when I have the drama that is Ava and Liam to keep me entertained?"

Remus can't help but laugh. "Have they finally admitted they're madly in love with each other?"

"Oh no, no, no, no, it's much better," Gabe says with a grin. "They're pretending they're just really, really good friends."

Remus groans.

"It's pretty good shit Remus, watching them try to explain to themselves why they're making heart eyes at their platonic buddy. Sometimes I catch them trying to look at me the same way just to make themselves feel better."

Remus scrunches his nose. "Gross."

"It's hilarious." He sways a little closer to Remus, shoulders knocking. "So you see, I don't just want you here because I'm bored."

Their eyes meet and then flick away.

Teasing.

The main house is bustling when they get there, clearly some of the last to arrive. They walk in through the back door and right into the chaos of the kitchen.

"Excuse meee!" Ava sings as she swerves around them, carrying plates into the living room where the sound of voices and music drifts through the walls.

"Ah good, you two are here," Mia says from where she's stood, stirring something at the stove, Charlotte back in her arms. Remus finds he can't look at the little girl. "Gabe can you grab the casserole dish off the counter—careful it's hot, use the mittens you muppet! And Remus, darling, if you wouldn't mind taking in the cutlery?" she nods over her shoulder to the piles of forks and knives.

“Of course,” he says at the same time Gabe moves for the casserole—mitts on his hands. They head for the living room and nearly run straight into the gawky teenager coming in the opposite direction. The kid’s eyes go wide at the sight of Remus and then quickly drop to the floor.

“Hey Jack,” Gabe says easily. Jack hasn’t grown into himself yet, thin and clearly uncomfortable with his height, always stooping over, shaggy brown hair hanging in his eyes, hiding him. He’s quiet, at least around Remus.

“I—“ he starts and then stops. “I just—I’m gonna—yeah.” He turns away, apparently no longer interested in whatever it was he was going to get from the kitchen.

Remus sighs. He knows he should say something to Jack, he’s just never sure what.

“You okay?” Gabe asks, concern in his eyes.

Remus nods, watching Jack sink down into his seat at the dinning room table, looking very much like someone who wants to disappear.

“He’s afraid of me,” Remus says finally.

“He’s not afraid of you, he’s...he just feels guilty that’s all. It’s hard for him, getting over what happened.”

Remus sees flashes—the Shack, Snape, James, blood. Hot and pungent and sweet on his tongue.

He knows a thing or two about guilt.

“C’mon,” Gabe nudges Remus with his shoulder. “Lets get the table set yeah? I’m starving.”

The dining room is filled with a long wooden table and a plethora of candles dripping wax. The walls are covered in homemade artwork like everywhere else in the house, though in here it’s mostly done on canvases and not just scraps of paper. In the bottom corners the kids have signed their names.

When he finishes doling out the cutlery Remus heads to the end of the table where Ava, Gabe and Liam appear to be having a heated discussion. Well, Ava and Gabe anyway, Liam is mostly just spectating. He smiles and nods when Remus sits down.

“Good to see again,” he says. Liam has short blond hair, shaved on the sides and left slightly longer on top. His eyes are big and brown. He’s slightly older than Remus—twenty-two or twenty-three, somewhere around there.

“Good to see you too.”

“I can’t even believe you’re making this argument right now,” Ava throws her arms up in exasperation.

“It’s not my fault you read the book wrong.”

“Read the—I didn’t read the book wrong! You CAN’T read a book wrong!”

“I mean clearly you can.”

Remus leans towards Liam, keeping his voice low in an attempt to avoid being dragged into this. “What are they arguing about?”

Liam smirks. “You ever heard of Little Women?”

“They’re friends!”

“They are not friends! That’s not how you act with your friends. It’s not my fault that I’m heartbroken when she wrote them like THAT.”

Gabe rolls his eyes, drinking from his wine glass before answering back. “You’re just as bad as Laurie is.”

“He isn’t bad! It was a fair assumption!”

Gabe snorts. “You can’t just walk around assuming people are going to fall in love with you.”

“You can when they act like they’re in love with you!” Ava looks about ready to start pulling her hair out.

“No really,” Remus whispers, “what the hell are they talking about?”

Liam only smiles and waves his hand. “I’ll lend you a copy. You’ll like it.”

“She acted like his friend.”

“Bullshit, you and I don’t act like that.”

For the briefest of moments Gabe makes eye contact with Remus, mischief hiding just in the corner of his mouth, it’s an expression Remus has seen a dozen times before on another boy’s face. It says, look at me, I’m so clever, look what I just did. Remus doesn’t know what’s coming but he already feels sorry for Ava.

“You and Liam do,” Gabe fires back.

“Exactly!” the word is barely out of her mouth before she freezes. “Or—er—” her cheeks flush, the colour spreading all the way up her neck.

“Sorry,” Gabe prods innocently. “Exactly what?”

Remus kicks him under the table but that only makes his grin wider. Liam has suddenly become very interested in his napkin.

It’s clear that Ava’s aware she’s been tricked, giving Gabe a flat stare. “Oh fuck off.”

But Gabe is far too pleased with himself. “No really, I want to know. Because wouldn’t that prove my point? I mean unless there’s something more than friendship between you and

Liam?“

“Fuck off Gabe. I mean it,” Remus sees her shoot Liam a worried glance, the boy in question still looking at the table.

“Oi, Ava, watch the language around the kids, you know better than that,” Mia says as she comes into the room with the last of the dinner, taking her place at the head of the table, causing all other conversation to die out as everyone turns to her. “Well go on,” she smiles, gesturing to the various dishes. “Dig in everyone!”

The dinner is good, all hearty homemade food, the kind Remus hasn’t had since the Potters died. It wasn’t until he came here that he realized how much he missed it, Sunday dinners at James’s house. There was hole left in Remus by his mother’s death and his father’s absence that Euphemia and Fleamont filled so quickly, and so willingly, that it took losing them for Remus to realize that it was even there.

Ava and Gabe are back to laughing and joking with each other in seconds, Liam chiming in here and there, though the colour hasn’t quite left his cheeks, and Remus doesn’t miss the way his eyes linger on Ava a little longer than everyone else. After the dishes are cleared away and the younger kids escorted to bed, new bottles of wine opened, the conversation starts to get serious.

“But if it passes,” Ben is saying, when Remus starts listening to the adults, “what’s the plan? We won’t be able to stay here.”

“It won’t pass, “ Alexandra, a woman with jet black hair and intense eyes says from across the table. She sits at Mia’s side. The two of them are close, though Remus hasn’t quite been able to figure out to what extent.

“You can’t just decide that,” Ben rolls his eyes. “We need to prepare for that possibility—“

“There’s nothing to prepare for,” Alexandra snaps back. “If it passes we’re fucked. So it can’t pass. That’s what we need to focus on.”

Ben shakes his head, sitting back in his chair. “Mia, c’mon, we need to be practical.”

“Don’t talk to her like I’m not here!”

“Oh no, I’m well aware you’re here.”

“Enough,” Mia waves her hand like a white flag between them. “You’re bickering worse than the kids.”

“Sorry,” everyone turns towards Remus who does his best not to buckle under the attention. “But what are you talking about? What can’t pass?”

The room goes strangely quiet for a moment, everyone looking away, avoiding eye contact with him, except for Mia. Mia doesn’t even flinch.

“Have you spoken with your father recently, about his work?” she asks calmly, without judgement.

Remus feels himself fidget. “No I—no.” He hasn’t spoken to his father at all, about his work or otherwise. The last time he heard from him was on his birthday, he received a store bought card via owl. Remus wrote back a very polite thank you note. That was the entirety of their communication for the year.

Ben blows out a breath, earning him a glare from both Alexandra and Gabe, but Remus is mostly just focused on Mia.

“What is it?” he asks eventually, throat tight. “What is he—what is he doing?”

There is nothing but kindness in Mia’s eyes. “He’s been trying, for the past few years, to pass a new law that would prohibit werewolves from gathering in groups larger than two.”

“Prick,” Ava mutters under her breath before her eyes go wide. “Shit, sorry Rem—“

“It’s okay,” he cuts her off, struggling a bit around the lump in his throat. “He—I didn’t realize he was still—“ he tries to swallow but it’s difficult. He doesn’t know what to say. I mean he knew, of course, that his father’s views of werewolves had never really changed, and yet to hear that he was still campaigning against them...

It isn’t personal, Remus tries to tell himself. It isn’t about you.

Surprisingly that doesn’t help.

“You think you can stop him?” Remus manages to ask after a few minutes.

Mia tilts her head from side to side. “We’re certainly trying, we’ve managed to delay him so far, but he’s gaining support. There was a piece about it in the Prophet, portrayed the law in a very positive light.”

“Fucking Prophet,” Alexandra mutters, twirling her wine glass between her fingers and staring mutinously at the table. “I swear to god one of these days I’m gonna burn that place to the ground.”

“Oh yeah, cause that’ll really prove them wrong about us,” Ben says dryly.

“I don’t need to prove anything to them.”

Ben rolls his eyes. “How nice for you.”

“Enough you two, honestly,” Mia pinches the bridge of her nose.

“We’ve been looking into old caselaw,” Liam interjects, getting Remus’s attention. “Trying to see if there’s precedent for a dismissal or anything else that might help us argue against him. We’ll never win this fight based on emotion or public opinion, but maybe if we have the law on our side...” he trails off, shrugging.

“I want to help,” Remus looks from Liam to Mia. “I—I’m good at this sort of stuff, research. I want to help.” This is exactly the opposite of what Moody wants him to be doing here, but Remus doesn’t care.

There’s something like pride in Mia’s eyes that makes Remus feel all warm inside. It’s been a while since he’s had that kind of approval directed at him.

“Well,” she says eventually. “I’m sure Liam will be able to find some use for you, won’t you Liam?”

“Absolutely,” the older boy grins, so does Gabe.

Moody read Remus the riot act before he left this time, about keeping his distance, about not getting attached. Or involved. But Moody doesn’t understand. Doesn’t understand that Remus’s whole life the only other werewolf he’d known had been a monster. And for the first time he has people around him who make it easier not to hate himself. Not to feel ashamed. He can’t just stand back and watch his father destroy that. He won’t.

He helps clean up the remaining dishes, eventually finding himself at the sink, washing and drying while everyone else heads off to bed, or to check on the kids.

“You don’t have to do that y’know,” Mia comes up behind him, sliding the last few plates into the sink.

Remus shrugs. “I don’t mind. I like having something to do.” Besides, his mind is spinning too much at the moment to go back to the quiet of his bedroom.

She leans against the counter, watching him for a minute. “Well,” she says eventually, “ask me then.”

Remus has no idea how she can tell, how she knows that he’s had a question gnawing at him, begging to be said. He keeps his eyes on the dishes in the sink.

“He’s my dad,” he says eventually, causing Mia to nod, arms crossed over her chest.

“He is.”

“So why not—why haven’t you asked me to go to him? To plead your case?” The way they were talking it’s clear this isn’t a new problem, Remus doesn’t know how it wasn’t the first thing they asked him, the minute they heard his name.

Mia’s eyes soften, her answer taking its time. “It’s because he’s your dad,” she says eventually, “that it wouldn’t be a fair thing to ask of you.”

That answer surprises Remus. He picks up a plate and starts scrubbing, just to give himself something to do, time to think of a response. He can’t help but wonder if Dumbledore would have felt the same in her position. He doesn’t think so. He’s never known Dumbledore to waste an advantage.

“You barely know me,” he says finally, voice soft. “Surely getting this stopped matters more to you than my...” he’s not even sure what the word he’s looking for is. “Then being fair to me.”

Mia reaches out and squeezes his arm, something about her touch reminding him painfully of his mother, his hands freeze in the lukewarm water in front of him. “You and your father aren’t close I take it?” she asks softly, instead of answering his question.

Remus lets out a shaky breath, bracing himself against the counter. “No, not really, no. As you can tell he’s not exactly a fan of...”

“Werewolves?”

He only nods. Feeling embarrassed by the word the same way he always does.

“That must have been very hard, when you were growing up?”

Remus shrugs. “I had my mum.” And my brothers.

“Had?”

His grip on the counter tightens, eyes on the dirty dish water. “She died when I was in school,” and then, for no reason that he can understand, maybe because of the wine, he keeps going; “Actually she killed herself. So,” he swallows with difficulty, “yeah.”

Mia squeezes his arm again. “I’m so sorry Remus.”

He doesn’t usually talk about his mum, doesn’t need to, everyone in his life was there. They saw it. Sometimes he feels guilty though, about the way his life has moved on, about the days when she doesn’t cross his mind. Every once and a while he’ll smell something or hear something and it’ll remind him of her and he won’t be able to remember the last time he thought about her. The last time he spoke her name out loud. He wonders if anyone does—talk about her, that is. Or if they’ve all let her down. Let her fade away.

Remus pulls back, rubbing at his eyes, trying to get the sting out of them. “I don’t think she really minded that much, that I was...a werewolf. But she was a Muggle so maybe that’s why, I don’t know. It bothered her more to see me in pain. To think about the future my dad told her I would have. She just...didn’t want me to be alone, you know?” Ironical, since that is apparently exactly what his father is trying to ensure.

“And are you?” Mia asks finally. “Alone?”

“I—“ god it must be the wine, his voice cracking as he goes to rub his eyes again, trying to force the tears back. He doesn’t even know why they’re there. Alone wouldn’t be the right word. More like he feels...anchor less. He didn’t realize how much Hogwarts was keeping them all together until they left, and now it’s as though none of them can find each other. None of them have a port. And he’s stuck watching everyone he loves drift further and further away from him.

His breath hitches and a second later Mia is pulling him into a hug. She's shorter than him, so he has to stoop slightly, yet somehow she still manages to make it feel like she's gathered all of him in her arms. That she will hold him together and keep him safe. And Remus isn't crying, really he isn't, he's too old for that honestly. To break down so easily and in front of a stranger. But he is having a little trouble breathing.

"I don't need to know you well to care about you Remus," Mia says softly. "You've been so brave my darling. But you're safe here. You're wanted."

Remus hiccups, holding onto her a little tighter. The shocking truth, he realizes then, is that he might actually believe her.

When he was last here he started helping Mia with teaching the little kids. To read, and write, to do their maths, but more than anything, Mia needed his help to teach them about magic. Most people at Lupercal are uncomfortable with magic. Gabe, Ava, and Liam, never went to Hogwarts at all, which shocked Remus when they told him, though in retrospect it shouldn't have. They're all around the same age, if they had been there Remus would have seen them.

Their discomfort with magic goes beyond lack of skill though. They feel rejected by the Wizarding world, so they, in turn, have chosen to reject it right back. It's not as though they could get work as Wizards, most of the older wolves had basically been living as Muggles before they came to Lupercal, many of them don't even have their wands anymore, and haven't cast anything in years. But Mia still thinks it's important for the little kids to know that part of themselves. To decide whether they want to embrace it or not.

"Do it again!"

"Yeah, that was like, totally awesome."

Oliver and William both stare up at him, wands held awkwardly in their own hands. Neither of them are comfortable with them, they act like Muggles more than children who have grown up in the Wizarding world.

Remus bites back a smile. "Yeah alright, once more, but then you two need to start doing it yourselves okay?" they nod enthusiastically.

"Wingardium," Remus announces and moves his wand more obviously than he normally would, "Leviosa." He points at William who is instantly lifted off his feet, laughing and flapping his arms around like a bird.

"Brilliant," Oliver says, jumping up and slapping his friend's toes with the tips of his fingers. "That's so—I wanna fly. Do me next!" he's practically bouncing up and down as Remus lowers William back to the floor. The kid is grinning from ear to ear, stumbling slightly as he gets his balance again.

"I've already done you," Remus says. "Now, it's your turn," he points at the apples on the table in front of them. "Remember everything we talked about, clean wand movements and

exact pronunciation, okay? No dragging out your “a” or over pronouncing your “g” got it?”

The boys grumble but nod, reluctantly turning to their apples. Remus adjusts their arms, their grips on their wands.

“It’s like holding a sword!” William pipes up, causing his best friend to roll his eyes.

“Oh like you’ve ever held a sword.”

“I have done!”

“What?! When?”

“I—“

“Oi, boys,” Remus interrupts, feeling remarkably like he’s back in his dorm room at Hogwarts, trying to get James and Sirius to do their coursework. “Let’s focus shall we? Go on, try again.”

And they do. Remus having to correct their pronunciation and wand movements a few more times before—

“I DID IT!” William is jumping up and down, causing his apple which had, in fact, risen several centimetres off the surface of the table, to come crashing back down, rolling onto the floor. “I did it! I did it! I did it!”

“No fair!” Oliver turns very crossly back to his own apple. “Wingardium—bloody—Leviosa,” he flicks his wand so hard it actually shoots out of his hand. “This is stupid.”

“Hey, hey,” Remus says softly, coming to crouch beside him so that they’re closer to eye level. The younger boy has his arms crossed over his chest and is glaring at the place where his wand landed.

“I can’t do it,” he says eventually, sounding just as sad as he does angry.

“Yeah you can, of course you can,” Remus reaches out, picking up the fallen wand. “Things take time Oliver, learning new things is hard. You can’t expect yourself to be perfect right away.”

The boy makes a grumpy “hrmph” noise that Remus takes as an expression of skepticism. “Here—William, I’m gonna get you to cast the spell again in a second okay?”

William nods, looking nervously at his friend, clearly not pleased that he’s made him upset.

“Oliver, you know that thing you do, where you mimic everything Amelia does and annoy the heck out of her?”

A small smile picks up the corner of his mouth. “Yeah,” he says, unable to stop himself from sounding pleased.

“Well I want you to do that with William okay? Don’t even think about the spell or casting or anything, just mimic everything he does the same way you do with Amelia. D’you think you can do that?”

Oliver chews on his bottom lip for a second before eventually nodding his head.

“Brilliant,” Remus gives him a small pat on the shoulder before standing up again and taking a step back. “You ready William?” The other boy nods. “Any time you want then, go for it.”

William faces his apple like it’s an adversary on a battlefield, all earlier silliness gone.

“Wingardium,” he begins, Oliver barely a second behind him, doing, honestly a spot on impression. No wonder Amelia finds it so annoying. “Leviosa!”

Two red apples tremble and shake and lift into the air with tremendous effort. But still, they do lift. It’s certainly a start.

“It worked!”

“Holy heck this is the coolest!”

“We did it! I can’t believe we did it!” Oliver throws his arms around the boy next to him with such enthusiasm that both of them teeter and end up on the floor, laughing and wrestling, as their apples smash back down onto the table. Remus can’t help smiling at them, something aching in his chest.

Memories of different boys and different laughter and easier joy.

“Alright you lot,” Remus turns around to find Mia leaning against the doorway, watching on with amusement. “Lunch time, go on, the others are already eating.”

“What’re we having?” Oliver asks as he and William clumsily untangle themselves from one another.

Mia smiles. “Grilled cheese.”

“Sweet.”

“Oi, I’ll race you,” William elbows his friend.

Oliver grins. “You’ll lose.”

“Nuh-uh.”

“Yeah-yuh.”

“Hey, no running in the house,” Mia says, not that the boys pay much attention to her, eyes only for each other, the competition clearly on. “Did you two hear me?” she says, though she doesn’t sound particularly stern.

“Yeah Mia we heard you,” Oliver says lightly. “No running, got it.”

However, the moment they’re out the door there is the unmistakable sound of pattering footsteps down the hall. Mia rolls her eyes, Remus unable to hold back a laugh.

“They’re a menace those two,” she says, fondness in her voice.

“I like them,” Remus looks over at the slightly mangled apples behind him and quickly vanishes the mess.

“You’re good at that you know.”

“Huh?” he looks back at her, and she nods towards the now empty table.

“Teaching. You’re a natural.”

For some reason he blushes at that. “I used to help people at school sometimes,” he shrugs, feeling slightly embarrassed though he isn’t sure why.

Mia nods, looking like she’s about to walk away before Remus speaks again.

“Can I ask you something?” he leans back against the table behind him, arms crossing over his chest.

“Absolutely. Fire away.”

Remus pauses for a minute, working through exactly what it is he’s trying to say here. The afternoon sun is soft today, filtering in through the bay window beside him, views of fields stretching out on the other side. This place feels a thousand miles away from everything—the city, the Wizarding world, the war. Everything. Though he supposes that is the point.

“Why aren’t Oliver and William in school?” he asks finally. “They’re both of age, they should be at Hogwarts. And Gabe, Ava, Liam? I mean, did they just not want to go? Were you afraid they wouldn’t be...that people would find out about them?”

Mia just looks back at him for a moment, an indecipherable look on her face as she steps further into the room, sitting on the arm of one of the large chesterfields. “Remus,” she says slowly, like she’s trying not to spook him. “Werewolves aren’t allowed at Hogwarts.”

He just blinks.

Because

Well

That’s a bit of a ridiculous thing to say to him of all people.

“I went to Hogwarts,” he finally manages, losing the ability to fully articulate his thoughts.

Mia nods slowly. “Yes, I know.”

“So then you know that’s not true?” he can feel his brows drawing together, knows the confusion is written all over his face.

She smiles sadly at him. “Did you never wonder, why you were the only one?”

Remus opens his mouth and then closes it again. Because...no, not really, he hadn’t. He’d just assumed he WAS the only one. He certainly had felt that way. Completely alone. A freak.

“Things changed with Dumbledore, did you not know?” he presses on. “If you had written to him, if you’d told him, he would have let them come. If you do it now—he’ll let Oliver and William in, I promise you.”

There’s something sad in her eyes, something gentle in her voice. “No Remus, he wouldn’t have and he won’t.”

But that just doesn’t make any sense to him. “I don’t understand.”

She looks at him like she doesn’t quite know how to respond, before letting out a worn down sigh. “I have spoken to Dumbledore,” she says finally. “He was very polite, which is more than I can say for most people I speak to,” she offers him a weak smile. “But he made it clear that my kids would not be welcome at Hogwarts. That he simply did not have the resources to accommodate them.”

Something cold runs down Remus’s spine, his world trembling ever so slightly. “What?” he says dumbly. “What.”

“I’m sorry Remus,” she sounds like she means it but Remus can’t understand why, thoughts swirling.

“But why would he let me come then? That doesn’t—it doesn’t make any sense.”

Mia bites her lower lip, hands folded in her lap. “Well,” she starts slowly. “I can only tell you what I think his reasons were, but I don’t know anything for certain.”

His heart stutters in his chest. “Tell me,” he says, even though he isn’t sure if he means it. “Tell me, please?”

Mia sighs, running a hand through her hair. “Partly, I think it was because your father is an important man, and him and Dumbledore had at least some form of cordial relationship.”

Funny, Remus had never considered the possibility that his father was part of the reason he’d been able to go to school. It would require Lyall to stand up for Remus, to fight for him, claim him, and that just didn’t seem like something he would do.

“But I also think,” Mia goes on carefully, “that Dumbledore is a very smart man, that he had some idea, even back when you were eleven, that things were changing. That a war was coming. And that having a werewolf on his side might be useful.”

Oh.

It shouldn't feel as destabilizing as it does. And yet Remus can't help but grab onto the table behind him, forcing his breath to come out evenly. So what if Dumbledore used him? If he thought of him as a weapon? So what. So what. So what. It didn't change anything. Did it?

"And here you are," Mia says finally, causing Remus's eyes to snap up. And what he sees tells him that she hasn't been fooled, that she knew the moment he showed up here that it wasn't by choice or by accident, but because he had been sent. Doing exactly what Dumbledore had raised him to.

"Mia—"

But she waves his words away. "It's alright Remus," and it sounds like she means it. "Spy all you like, I have nothing to hide. And besides," her smile is small but genuine. "I'm happy to have you here."

Despite his best efforts Remus's heart is racing in his chest, tremors running through his arms and legs. He feels like he can't get his footing, can't find anything stable to hold onto.

There's a crash from down the hall and then crying.

"Ah," Mia says knowingly, getting to her feet. "Duty calls," she's half-way to the door when she stops, turning back to Remus. "Will you be okay?"

He does his best to pull himself together. "Yeah," he manages tensely. "Yeah, I'll be okay."

Mia doesn't exactly look convinced but the crying down the hall is growing louder so with one final look over her shoulder she nods, disappearing out the door.

Remus hangs his head, nails biting into the wood of the table he's leaning on. "This doesn't change anything," he whispers to himself, trying to convince himself that his whole life hasn't been a lie. That whatever political scheming brought him to Hogwarts he's grateful for it.

"This doesn't change anything."

But he can't help wondering, how many of the people in his life see him as nothing but a dog on a leash. A trained monster. Ready to bite on command.

No wonder they didn't expel Sirius for what he did in fifth year.

After all, he'd only been using Remus as Dumbledore intended.

A few hours later Remus finds himself somewhere in the woods surrounding the farm with a very excited Gabe looking at him expectantly. It's cold but not freezing, the leaves on the trees changing colours and falling to the ground. In the distance Remus can hear the sounds of running water, he expects it's from a small stream. Sunlight dribbles over them, highlighting little pieces of the world. Remus is wearing a sweater, Gabe is in a t-shirt.

“I’ve never met a werewolf as cold as you, you know that?”

“What can I say,” Remus replies dryly. “I’m one of a kind.” Not bothering to explain that he doesn’t cover up because he’s cold. But because it’s become second nature. Hiding his scars.

Gabe grins. “You are though.” The sincerity in his voice makes Remus look away.

“So,” he says, desperate to change the subject. “How does this work then?”

He’d asked Gabe, the last time he was here, if he’d teach him how to transform on command. He’d never seen anything like the wolves at Lupercal, never even heard of it. He had always believed—been taught—that wolves were tied to the moon. That they had no control. It turned out that wasn’t quite true.

“Well, first of all,” Gabe picks up a stray stick and starts waving it around. “You have to relax.”

Remus rolls his eyes. “I’m never relaxed.”

Gabe laughs. “Fair enough. But you don’t have to look so scared.”

That surprises Remus, mostly because he hadn’t realized that he was scared.

“I—” he cuts himself off, unsure of exactly what it is he’s trying to say. After a few seconds of struggling he lets out a breath. “I’ve never not been scared...of transforming. I suppose moon or no moon I still...” because it’s more than just the pain. It’s the loss of control. Of who he is. Becoming something that has the power to cause so much harm. The power to make him cause so much harm. He hates it.

Gabe looks sad. “I’m sorry.”

“What for?”

Now it’s Gabe’s turn to struggle. “That this has been so hard for you. Being what we are.”

Again, Remus finds himself surprised. “It hasn’t been for you?”

Gabe’s head wobbles from side to side. “Life is hard,” he says finally. “But this?” he pulls up his shirt, revealing the pearl white teeth marks on his stomach. “This is easy. It’s...natural. It’s not something that was done to me, not anymore, not for a long time, now it just is me. I wish you could feel that too.” Remus wants to know who these people are, that they think they know him when they’ve barely met. And at the same time he understands that there are parts of him that these practical strangers see that no one else in his life ever will. Ever can. No matter how desperate he is to show them.

“I don’t know how to think of this as anything but a punishment,” Remus says eventually, truthfully. Harsh ugly words thrown into the beautiful woods surrounding them.

For once Gabe actually looks serious, walking towards him, slow and careful. He doesn’t stop. He keeps coming. Closer and closer until he brings his hand to the back of Remus’s

neck and pulls him down, pressing their foreheads together. “Let me show you then,” he says softly.

Remus doesn’t move, barely breathes, watching Gabe intently. Watching his eyes close. And then, a second later, watching them open. Pupils turned into slits. Remus instantly stiffens but Gabe’s touch is firm, not letting him pull away.

“It’s okay,” he says calmly. “It’s okay Remus. We’re okay.”

Remus exhales slowly, trying not to panic, trying not to let the fear overtake him.

“Can you feel him, inside you?” Gabe goes on. “Can you feel your wolf?”

Remus shakes his head, nose brushing Gabe’s.

“Close your eyes, listen.”

Remus has no idea what it is he’s listening for but he does as he’s told. The world behind his eyes is dark and he tries to convince himself not to be afraid of it. Of himself. Of the things that live inside this skin.

“That feeling you try so hard to silence, to push away, to pretend doesn’t exist,” Gabe goes on, a steady beat to his words. A pulse. “Listen to it now. Let it grow loud. Let it speak to you.”

Every fibre of his being recoils at the idea. He has a body covered in scars. A body that cracks and breaks and rips him apart. He has a body that betrays him. That hurts him. And he does not want to know it. He does not want to hear it. He wants to walk through life barely acknowledging its existence. He lives in his head. He lives in his thoughts. In the small spaces of himself that he can control.

“Remus,” Gabe says quietly. “Breathe okay? You’re safe. I promise you’re safe. Trust yourself. You are good. Every part of you. That means this too.”

“I can’t,” Remus doesn’t know when his voice started getting so shaky.

“You can,” Gabe says soothingly. “This hatred was given to you, but you don’t deserve it, you don’t need to carry it around. Put it down. Let yourself be free.”

He tries to listen. To search out the parts of himself that he has spent so much of his life denying. Ashamed of. Afraid of. He hears the sound of the wind in the branches over their heads. He hears the soft waves of Gabe’s breath. Of his own pulse. And beneath that. Beneath the hum of his thoughts,

he hears a howl.

His eyes snap open and the world around him is sharp, hyper focused. And something huge pushes against his skin. Against his ribs. Against the inside of his skull.

“Ah,” Remus whimpers, the fear coming back. “Fuck, fuck, fuck.” He hates this. He hates this. Why did he think he wanted this?

“Shh,” Gabe says calmly as they stumble, Remus now off balance. “You’re okay. It’s okay. Don’t let the fear get the better of you.”

Remus is breathing hard, fighting against the tightening of his skin, his senses all feel overloaded. He can hear and smell and see more intensely than he ever has before.

“I don’t know how to stop being scared,” he pants.

“I told you, trust yourself, stop fighting this.”

“I have to fight it. If I don’t fight it I’ll hurt someone.”

“You won’t, I promise you won’t.”

And it’s only because he feels as though he’s about to break apart that he says it. Knowing it’s cruel. “Is that what you told Jack?”

Something painful flickers in Gabe’s eyes and his hold on the back of Remus’s neck loosens ever so slightly.

“Fuck,” Remus’s eyes snap shut. It’s too much. Too much is happening in his body all at once. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” Gabe says after a short pause.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry. Please make it stop, I don’t want to do this anymore.”

He hears Gabe exhale before squeezing Remus’s neck. “You can do this Remus.”

“I can’t.”

“You can. I’m not asking you to trust me, I know you don’t have any reason to, but you have to trust yourself. You have to trust this part of yourself. Stop treating it like the enemy and maybe it will stop acting like it.”

Gabe gives the back of his neck another squeeze and then he’s gone and Remus feels like he’s falling even though he’s standing on solid ground.

“Gabe!” he calls out helplessly. He hears something snap and tear and then his eyes are flying open and all he sees is a giant black wolf standing in front of him.

Remus stumbles back, bones aching, begging to shift and break and reform. It’s like the full moon and nothing like it all at once. Remus feels high, feels adrenaline coursing through his veins making him too bright. The wolf just stares at him, yellow eyes intent, and Remus waits for the attack. For the teeth baring and back arching, he’s not sure he has enough control of his legs to run at the moment. Not sure he could bear to use his wand on Gabe.

But the wolf doesn't move. Instead he sits back on his hind legs, tilts his head up towards the evening sky and howls. The noise touches every molecule in Remus's body. Every particle, every atom. He feels it down to his very core.

And then, in the distance, back towards the farm house, another voice joins Gabe's. And another. And another. They're singing, Remus thinks, a little hysterically. The wolves are singing. It's a heartbreaking sound. A beautiful sound.

He almost laughs.

He's never thought anything about werewolves was beautiful before.

He closes his eyes and lets the noise fill him up. Listen, Gabe had told him. Listen. So he does. He is standing in front of a werewolf without a wand, with his eyes closed, listening to it howl. And he isn't afraid. And he wants to join them. Some part of him is aching and desperate and begging to be with them. Like walls crumbling inside of him he feels his mind let go and his body take over.

It hurts a little. But nothing like normal. The world bends and flickers and reforms around him. Brighter and louder and fuller than it was only moments ago. Except it doesn't hurt him now the way it did before. He blinks his eyes open as a wolf and the world sparkles. There are no locked doors, no windowless rooms, no dirty mattresses. It isn't dark or hidden or secret. For the first time in his life Remus Lupin is a wolf. And he is free.

And he sings.

"Holy shit." Remus gasps as he comes back to himself some time later. He has no idea how long he was a wolf. Only that the sun has now set, the sky dark blue and quickly turning black, stars twinkling into view. He's breathing heavy, chest heaving as he adjusts to his dulled senses. He's sore, scratches here and there on his skin, but nothing like the moon usually is.

"Holy shit," he repeats.

He hears Gabe laugh beside him and turns his head to see the other boy lying on his back in the dirt as well, looking up at the sky.

"That shouldn't be possible. How is that possible? Werewolves can't control their transformations."

Gabe turns his head to look at Remus, eyes twinkling in the moonlight. "You sure about that?"

He had been. He had been his whole life before he came here. He just stares dumbly back at Gabe who eventually takes pity on him.

"The full moon is the only time we really can't control it, the rest of the time..." he trails off shrugging. "The wolf is always there, you just have to learn how to talk to him."

“Talk to him,” Remus repeats, that turn of phrase seeming so ludicrous to him. In fact, this whole situation seems ludicrous and he can’t help but laugh. “So you’re saying I can switch back and forth whenever I want except on the full moon?”

“I mean, I’m sure you could try not to transform on the full moon if you really wanted to, but it would hurt like a bitch. Well, more of a bitch.” Gabe shivers, but Remus isn’t put off by that description. Instead he feels a small spark of hope catch in his chest.

“You mean it is possible? To get strong enough that you would never have to transform again?”

Gabe’s expression grows serious. “That’s not what this is about,” he says sternly.

Remus’s brow furrows. “What’s not what this is about?”

Gabe waves his hand in the air. “Suppressing. Denying. That’s not why we learn how to control our transformations.”

“Oh?” Remus asks, because he can’t think why not. Rolling his eyes Gabe reaches over and smacks Remus lightly on the arm.

“Were you even paying attention just now? This is about acceptance. Accepting the wolf not shutting it up more,” and when Remus stays silent he pushes on. “Nothing good will come from that Remus. Surely you can understand that now? When you shove it down and deny it you turn it into something cancerous. Something poison. That isn’t what this is supposed to be.”

Remus holds his gaze a moment longer before looking away, back up at the sky, at the nearly full moon above them. “This isn’t supposed to be anything. There isn’t a greater meaning here Gabe.”

The other boy snorts. “Says the man who thinks he’s being punished.”

“That’s not what I said.”

“Isn’t it?”

Remus bites back his retort, letting the cool fall night lick at his sweaty skin. He can still feel the last tendrils of adrenalin flickering through him. The howling in his chest closer to the surface than it ever has been before. He isn’t sure if he’s ready to keep it there. If he trusts it the way Gabe does. The way he wants him to.

“Tell me what happened, the first day I showed up here,” he says finally, breath forming clouds against the night sky.

There’s a long pause before Gabe speaks. “You know what happened.”

“Tell me again.” He’d thought he’d understood before. Now he isn’t so sure.

Gabe sighs. “The younger kids only ever transform on the full moon,” he starts. “You remember what it’s like, when you’re young, when you’re new, how much more painful it is?”

Remus nods, and then, realizing Gabe probably isn’t looking at him, clears his throat. “Yeah,” voice rough. “I remember.”

“Transforming like this, having this kind of control, it just isn’t possible until you’re older, or until you’ve done it a few times. Mia didn’t show me and Ava until we were seventeen. It’s easier to be in control when it’s not the full moon, but it still isn’t easy. I’m sure you noticed.”

“I noticed,” Remus says after a moment. His thoughts had still changed, there had still been an element of wolf, of instinct above all else, but he—he had felt present, in a way he never did on the full moon. “Why is that?”

“The moon calls to the wolf,” Gabe explains, “makes it stronger, stronger than the rest of you.”

“Is that why it hurts so much?” Remus does his best to keep the memories at bay. To not feel them and see them, because sometime they’re so visceral he might as well be experiencing them in real time. “Because the wolf is stronger?”

“It hurts so much because you’re fighting it so hard.” Gabe says, like it’s that simple. “If you hold your breath when your body needs to breathe it’s going to burn.”

Breathing and turning into a werewolf do not feel like comparable experiences to Remus but he doesn’t feel like arguing the point. “So what happened then, the day I first showed up? It wasn’t a full moon.”

“No,” Gabe sounds tired. “No it wasn’t a full moon,” there’s another brief pause before he presses on. “Jack is fifteen, which is young to start learning how to transform on command but he’s, well, he’s smart and he’s honestly pretty grounded all things considered and we thought...well, I thought it would be okay. And it was.”

“Until I showed up?”

He sighs. “See, we were going to turn back into our human selves, but that’s kind of tricky the first few times, so I switched back first, the way I just did with you, remember?”

Remus nods. “Yeah.” One second he’d been running through the trees with another wolf and the next there had been a boy in front of him saying “change back Remus, it’s time to change back”. He’d forgotten for a minute there, that there was anything to change back to.

“So I was...I was like this, I was me, and I was trying to get him to shift back and then I saw—his eyes flashed and his ears perked up and I knew he’d heard something or smelt something and I figured it was something back at the farm you know? But then he took off in the opposite direction and I thought, maybe it was a deer or, I don’t know, a fox or something. I wasn’t a wolf so I couldn’t, I couldn’t smell it, I couldn’t see.”

There's something desperate in his voice, something pleading.

"Nobody comes here, I mean nobody just walks in the way you did. We're in the middle of nowhere. I wasn't—it didn't even occur to me. And you didn't, you didn't scream Remus. You didn't cry out for help. I—I would have come faster, I swear I would have shifted faster if I had known. But I just..." he lets out a shaky breath. "It wasn't until I got to the driveway that I saw."

Remus lets that sit between them for a minute, the cold finally beginning to creep inside his skin.

"But why did he attack, if he wasn't—if he was still in control?"

"He's young, it was his first time trying like this, you just felt it, you're there and you're not, it takes time to get used to. To really be able to keep your instincts in check. And you..."

"Were a stranger?" Remus guesses.

Gabe actually laughs at that. "Sure, a stranger. But you smelt like fucking magic."

Remus's brows draw together, turning his head to look back at Gabe who is still staring at the sky. "What? You're all wizards too."

"Only technically," his profile is silhouetted by the moon. "But god I'd never smelt anything like you. The minute I turned back into a wolf it hit me, set me on fucking fire more like. And I could feel what Jack had felt—the instant fear. The need to tear and bite and protect. Fuck I almost ripped out your throat myself."

Remus laughs, not sure what else to do with that information. Not willing to let himself really go back to that moment. When he'd felt so certain he was going to die.

"Well," he says finally. "I'm glad you didn't."

Gabe turns away from the sky, eyes back on Remus, the ghost of a smile haunting his mouth.

"Yeah," he says slowly, "me too."

Remus had been unconscious for three days after the attack. When he woke he was disoriented and weak and in pain. The only one at Lupercal comfortable performing magic on other people was Mia and she had no skill with healing spells. So he'd been patched and sown together. And he'd wanted desperately to get the fuck out of there.

They'd tried to explain what had happened but Remus had only barely been listening. The only piece of information he was really able to absorb, really able to bring back to Moody after that trip, was that these people could transform whenever they wanted. That they were not held prisoner by the moon. No one had seemed pleased by that.

The other thing that had stuck with Remus, from the blur of those few days after he'd woken up, was Jack. He'd come to see Remus, just before he'd insisted on leaving despite Mia's many protests that he wasn't strong enough. She'd been right of course. He wasn't able to Apparate and the walk back to the road had torn open just about every one of his injuries.

Jack had hovered by the doorway, looking far younger than fifteen—than Remus remembered looking at fifteen—barely able to speak. His words were cracked and broken and stuttered. There was an apology in there, Remus was sure of it, but mostly what he kept saying. Repeating. Was "I didn't bite you."

I didn't bite you.

I didn't bite you.

They checked.

They checked.

I didn't bite you.

Remus was certain the refrain was for Jack more than it was for him. A reassurance that he hadn't done the unthinkable. The thing all of them are terrified of. The fear that haunts their existences.

Remus should have said something comforting to the kid—like that it really wouldn't have mattered if he had—but the truth is, he'd barely been able to process anything. Barely been able to eat. The minute he could stand he was walking out the door. He had no interest in staying in a house full of fucking werewolves who could shift at any moment. Especially not when he was injured and weak. On his way out the door Mia had told him about the shuttles that ran around the full moon. She had told him to think about it. To come back. To give them a chance.

If it had been up to him he wouldn't have. Two werewolf attacks was more than enough for one lifetime he felt. But as Moody had been very keen to point out. It wasn't up to him.

It's late when Remus and Gabe get back to the main house. The children have all gone to bed, the candles have all been lit, someone has put the record player on. Ava and Liam are dancing—or well, Ava is dancing, Liam is sort of swaying, admiring her. Mia and Alexandra on the couch, discussing something with their heads bent close together. Some other people scattered around the front room, wine glasses held lazily in their hands, or abandoned on coffee tables and windowsills.

Gabe tugs on Remus's elbow and nods at the stairs and though Remus isn't quite sure what the plan is, he follows after him. Gabe's bedroom is the last one on the second floor, it has indigo blue walls covered in posters, all Muggle, most foreign to Remus.

“Do you want to take a shower?” Gabe has his back to Remus, rummaging through his dresser.

Remus blinks. “What?”

Gabe turns around, handing him a clean pair of clothes before nodding towards the ensuite. “Shower? I’m taking one either way, but since you’re the guest I figured I’d offer you first dibs.”

Remus blinks again before looking down at himself. He is kind of a mess. “Right, yeah—I—yeah thanks.”

Gabe nods, kicking off his shoes and dropping down onto his bed. “There are extra towels under the sink. And don’t use all the hot water.”

Remus rolls his eyes. “As if you’re ever cold.”

Gabe grins back at him. “Every man has his limits Remus.”

He shuts the door and quickly sheds the tattered clothes that survived his transformation. He inspects himself for a minute, mud smeared and scrapped up, though nothing serious. His hands tremble slightly as they run over his skin. He still hasn’t fully processed what just happened. What he just did. He’s not sure he ever will if he’s being honest. After a few more seconds he does actually get into the shower, the hot water stinging, but not in a bad way.

He thinks about the first time he came back from Lupercal. About Sirius holding him up under the water. How gentle he’d been. How caring. And then he thinks about the second time.

Remus had been so angry when Moody told him he was leaving again. Not because he hadn’t expected it. Or because he was scared—which he was—but because James and Sirius had just lost their parents. Because they were both hurting so badly and Remus was supposed to be there. The way they had been there for him. The guilt had eaten at him the whole time he was away. Keeping him up at night. Especially when it turned out that Lupercal wasn’t some awful nightmarish place. Especially when he found himself feeling happy here.

That full moon, transforming with werewolves for the first time, it was different. Sure it helped, when he had Prongs and Padfoot and Wormtail. But there was always an undercurrent of fear. A need to hold back, that he felt even as a wolf, even if he couldn’t quite...think it. The frustration would linger even after the moon had faded and the sun had returned. Of being close to something but never quite getting what he needed. And then he’d transformed at Lupercal.

He didn’t have clear memories of being a wolf. But he did have...impressions. The happiness. The joy. At finally being with his own kind. They’d played without holding back. Without fear of injury. And it had left Remus battered and bruised in the morning but it had also left him feeling...fulfilled.

There was guilt about that too.

He felt guilty about everything honestly. Tearing himself apart trying to figure out how to make it right. How to make it up to Sirius somehow. Only to find out that while he'd been haunted by guilt Sirius had been snogging his ex-girlfriend.

You have no idea what I've been through, he'd said to Sirius.

He'd meant the guilt. But he knew that wasn't how Sirius took it. Not after the shape he'd been in the last time he'd come home. Not once he'd made the connection to werewolves. He knew exactly the sorts of horrors Sirius's prejudices would lead him to imagine. And he hadn't bothered to correct him. To say "actually, the werewolves are quite lovely believe it or not". Because he'd been angry. And petty. And childish. And because, maybe a little part of him, just as James had suggested, wanted to punish Sirius. Though if he was being honest, he wasn't even sure what for anymore.

"You definitely did use all the hot water you bastard," Gabe says when he steps out of the shower fifteen minutes after Remus, towel drying his hair. He's in a pair of flannel pyjama bottoms and an oversized grey t-shirt, Remus wearing the hoody and sweatpants Gabe lent him.

Remus snorts, turning back to the window, feeling the familiar ache in his bones that he always does when the full moon is near. Except it isn't the same this time. It doesn't make him feel quite so...fragile.

"Nice try. I shared a bathroom with a bunch of teenage boys for seven years, I know how to preserve hot water," not that Sirius could say the same.

The silence that follows is so uncharacteristic of Gabe that Remus actually turns around. The other boy is sitting at the end of his bed, towel held between his knees, a complicated look on his face.

"Gabe?" Remus asks tentatively.

"What was it like then?" the words seem to come out of him almost unwillingly.
"Hogwarts?"

Remus is surprised by the question, though he probably shouldn't be. It's an impossible thing to answer. All that Hogwarts was for him. Everything it meant. Everything that happened there. He built so much of himself behind those walls.

Gabe laughs, though there's little humour in it. "That good huh?" he looks up finally, eyes meeting Remus's.

Remus sighs, running a hand through his hair before walking over and sitting down on the bed next to him. He tries to figure out where to start. "I didn't think I was going to be able to go," is what he decides on. He can feel Gabe watching him. "My father made it pretty clear from the time of my attack what my...condition, would mean, when it came to my future."

"Prick," Gabe hisses, causing Remus to laugh.

“Yeah, well, he wasn’t wrong. Except that then Dumbledore became Headmaster and suddenly things changed,” he grimaces. “For me, I guess, things changed. I thought...I thought it meant that any werewolf would be allowed at Hogwarts but obviously...” he sighs, still struggling with this truth.

“That must have been lonely.”

Remus looks over at him, of all the reactions he’d expected that certainly wasn’t one of them.

“Lonely?” he asks.

Gabe shrugs. “Thinking you were the only one.”

It had been lonely. And scary. But he didn’t deserve Gabe’s pity, not after everything that had been given to Remus and no one else. “Self-absorbed more like,” he says finally. “I should have looked into it, I should have known Greyback wouldn’t stop at just one victim but...” he runs a hand over his face. “Mostly I just tried not to think about it.”

“The attack?”

Remus laughs. “Being a werewolf.”

“Ah.”

“Anyway, getting to go to school, getting to be around other kids it was...I don’t know, a dream come true.” He sneaks a guilty look at Gabe who, if he feels bitter, has done a good job of keeping it off his face. “And it didn’t hurt that the food was fucking delicious.”

Gabe laughs, easing some of the tension from the room. “There are like...teams or whatever, right?” he pushes Remus. “That you all get sorted into?”

It takes Remus a second to catch up. “Yeah, houses; Gryffindor, Ravenclaw, Slytherin and Hufflepuff.” Gabe nods though Remus can tell the words don’t mean much to him. It’s strange, when Remus comes from a world where these sorts of things define them. “Gryffindor values bravery, Ravenclaw intelligence, Slytherin ambition, Hufflepuff fair play.”

This time when Gabe nods there’s light behind his eyes. “Which one were you then—no wait,” he says when Remus opens his mouth. “Let me guess, Ravenclaw?”

Remus smirks. “Shockingly, no.”

Gabe’s mouth makes a dramatic “o” shape. “Slytherin?”

“Slytherin!” Remus says indignantly, punching him playfully in the arm. “Your second guess is Slytherin? Really?”

“What?” Gabe laughs. “I mean if it wasn’t Ravenclaw it could be any of them.”

“And you didn’t want to go with fair play first?”

He grins, canines on full display. “Nah, you don’t strike me as someone who plays fair.”

Remus punches him again. “Twat.”

“Go on then, which was it?”

“Well I don’t even know if I want to tell you now.”

Gabe rolls his eyes. “Don’t be a drama queen.”

“Gryffindor. It was Gryffindor.”

Gabe gives him a considering look. “Huh,” he says. “Okay, I can see that I guess.”

“Oh well, don’t strain your imagination too much.”

Gabe pushes him hard enough that he collapses down onto his back, weaker than he normally is. Gabe lies down next to him.

“What about me then,” Gabe asks, their heads turned towards one another. There’s something vaguely uncertain in his voice. Embarrassed. “Where do you think they’d put me?”

Remus pauses but the truth is fairly obvious. “Gryffindor, definitely.”

Gabe’s smile is soft. “Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“Think we would have been friends?”

Something wiggles in Remus’s chest. Four boys in a dormitory laughing. Running down the hallways. Sneaking through secret passages.

“Yeah,” Remus clears his throat. “Yeah, ‘course we would have.”

Gabe nods, looking back up at the ceiling while the pair of them sit in silence for a minute. “I think I would have liked that,” he says finally. “All the classes and clubs and things. I think maybe I would have been good at it.” He’s trying to keep his tone light but he doesn’t quite manage to.

“I could teach you, you know,” Remus says suddenly. “Magic, I mean. I know it’s not the same as...but I could teach you.” He knows that Gabe knows a few spells, that Mia taught him, but he never seems to use them. Never seems comfortable with it.

Something complicated flickers across Gabe's face. “Nah I—I don’t think so. Thanks though.”

But Remus isn’t quite willing to let it go, not when he can hear the longing in Gabe’s voice. He elbows him lightly. “It’s a part of you, you know, the same way you’re always saying the wolf is part of me. You shouldn’t hide from it.”

“Yeah except that magic doesn’t want me,” Gabe says flatly, trying and failing to hide the hurt in those words. “So it just makes it easier, not to want it back you know? Not to want that world,” he turns his head to face Remus then, the pair only inches apart. “But the wolves? Us? we want you.”

And for a moment it feels so simple. The life he could have if he just...stayed. No more lying, no more fear. Just days filled with running through the woods, free and unchained.

Remus pulls himself up to sitting, rubbing at his eyes. “It’s late,” he says eventually. “I should go back to my room.”

Gabe is slower to sit up. “You don’t have to, you know.”

Remus laughs, elbows resting on his knees, head dropping. “Gabe—”

“I’m just...I’m just saying it so you know. That you could...you could stay. That I want you to stay.”

It’s not that he doesn’t understand that there’s...something here. Something that could grow. And maybe it would be sweet and simple and pure. And maybe they would never hurt one another, maybe they would always be honest and kind, without any history to hold them back.

“I just...” Remus starts, still looking at his feet, hands laced at the back of his head, overly aware of how close Gabe is. How warm. “I can’t.”

The thing is, nothing feels as bright or as real or as alive as loving Sirius Black. Everything else pales by comparison. A candle flame to a forest fire. He knows that it isn’t the same for Sirius. Knows that he could be with people other than Remus. He accepted a long time ago that he would always love Sirius more. Honestly he never imagined he would get as much of him as he has. And maybe that should make him angry or bitter, but mostly it just makes him grateful. Because he knows that Sirius could walk away. And he can’t ever figure out why he doesn’t.

“Okay,” Gabe says a little stiffly. “That’s—yeah, yeah okay.”

He gets up off the bed and Remus feels a pang of guilt, finally lifting his head. “Gabe—”

“It’s okay Remus.”

“You said that already.”

“Right,” he’s standing over by his desk, back to Remus. “Sorry I—” he exhales. “It’s stupid. I’m stupid. I don’t why I even—I can’t believe I just—fuck, I’m so sorry if I made you uncomfortable.”

“Hey, no, Gabe, it’s fine. Really it’s fine. I’m just—I’m seeing someone so I...” god Remus is far too awkward for this.

“Ah,” Gabe shoves his hands in his pockets. “Should have guessed, stunner like you,” he shoots Remus a cheeky grin over his shoulder but it doesn’t quite reach his eyes.

Remus scoffs. “Please, you’re the one with the muscles and the tattoos.”

“You like my tattoos?”

“You know what you look like.”

Gabe laughs but the sound dies far too quickly, hand coming up and rubbing over his shaved head.

“Sometimes I just think...I mean who’s ever gonna—” he exhales, looking down and kicking at the ground. “Because there aren’t exactly werewolf clubs you know? And who else is ever going to want me?” He gives Remus a self-deprecating smile that nearly breaks his heart.

“All wizards don’t hate us you know.”

Gabe wobbles his head from side to side, expression skeptical. “No, I’m sure there are a few of them who think we’d make real nice pets.”

“You’ll find someone Gabe,” Remus perseveres. “I swear you will.”

The other boy nods. “Sure, yeah,” tone falsely cheery. “Sorry it’s, you know,” he gestures outside towards the sky. “Full moon always makes me fucking maudlin. Ignore me. I’ll see you tomorrow yeah?”

Remus does his best not to grimace at the clear dismissal. “Yeah,” he says, getting off the bed and heading for the door. “Hey Gabe?” he calls out before he makes it into the hallway. The other boy actually looks at him properly this time. “We’re...we’re okay right? Because I...” but he doesn’t know what to say, only knows that it’s nice. Having Gabe. Having someone who doesn’t just sympathize but who understands.

Gabe smiles, genuinely this time, even if it is a little bruised. “Yeah Remus, yeah we’re all good. Promise.”

Remus nods, feeling only slightly better. “Goodnight.”

“Night Remus.”

True to his word nothing changes between them. Not really. The next morning Gabe has the same smile on his face he always does, sitting next to Remus at the table and jabbing and poking him every time he wants to get his attention. Though Remus can’t help but feel that there’s something heavier about the way he looks at Ava and Liam.

About halfway through breakfast Jack comes into the room, making eye contact with Remus and instantly freezing. When Evelyn eventually shoves him in an attempt to get to the kitchen table he jumps, quickly turning around and practically jogging out of the room. Remus sighs.

“I’ll talk to him,” Gabe says, voice low.

Remus pauses for a second before shaking his head. “No I—I think it has to be me.”

Gabe looks at him uncertainly. “You sure?”

“Yeah,” he says, with more confidence than he feels. “Yeah tomorrow I’ll...pull him aside or something.”

“Okay,” Gabe swallows a mouthful of eggs.

At that moment a large bird flutters into the kitchen through the open window, an eagle Remus thinks, it’s sudden appearance making several of the younger kids scream. To be fair, it’s not a particularly friendly looking creature.

Mia takes one look at it and rolls her eyes. “Oh Jesus Fen,” she mutters under her breath as she gets up, going over to where the bird has perched itself on the counter and untying the letter from its leg. It squawks indignantly at her, as though offended, but she silences it with a sharp “Sh.”

“I thought you guys got letters by Muggle post?” Remus mutters to Gabe who’s watching Mia intently.

“We do. Usually.”

“That mother—” Mia quickly cuts herself off with a side look at the children who are still eyeing the bird on the counter with great suspicion. “—trucker,” she finishes eventually.

“Nice save,” Ava calls out, but Mia only bats her words away, eyes scanning and re-scanning the letter in her hands.

“What is it?” Gabe asks, food forgotten as his knuckles tap nervously on the tabletop. “Is it the law? Has it passed?”

“No, not that,” Mia sighs, pinching the bridge of her nose. “It’s Greyback,” Remus instantly feels the hair on the back of his neck stand up. “He wants to meet. To...talk,” she laughs dryly.

“What?” Liam asks. “When?”

“Today.”

“On the full moon?” Gabe demands indignantly.

“Yes, well, you know him, he likes to be dramatic,” she lets out another sigh, leaning more heavily against the counter. It’s clear the full moon is drawing on her, she has less energy than normal, the bags under her eyes more pronounced, her shoulders slightly stooped.

“You could refuse—make him pick another date?” Liam offers up.

Mia smiles ruefully. "I expect he would come anyway. He'd just be in a worse mood."

"We'll go with you then," Ava says.

For a minute Mia doesn't answer, clearly thinking. "No," she says finally.

"No!" Gabe begins outraged. "You can't—"

But she holds up her hand to silence him. "Ava and Liam, you two stay here, get everyone ready for the full moon. Gabe," she looks very pointedly at him, "you can come but only if you promise to behave, you understand?"

Gabe's mouth has formed a thin line but he nods his head curtly. "I understand."

"Good," she looks down the table. "Alexandra—"

"Yes, yes I'll come," she groans slightly as she stretches in her seat. "I just wish my back didn't feel like it got snapped in half last night."

Mia gives her a dry smile. "You're getting old."

"Speak for yourself."

"We'll leave by noon, meet him in the clearing, I want to get this over with. We'll all only feel worse the later in the day it gets," Mia's eyes go to the clock on the wall. "I'll write back to him now."

"Mia?" Remus finds his voice just as she starts heading out of the room. She stops in the doorway, turning back to him. "I—" Remus hasn't seen Greyback, not since the night he was bitten. He doesn't know how that will feel. What he'll do. But there is a part of him that can't bear not finding out. "Can I come?"

Alexandra snorts. "No."

But Mia is more hesitant, staring at him so intently that it is work for Remus to stop himself from squirming.

"It might be useful," Gabe jumps in. "Having someone who actually knows how to use their wand."

Mia rolls her eyes. "Fine. Remus you can come. But you will do as I say, do you understand?"

He nods quickly, causing a small spark of pain to shoot through his skull. Damn full moon. "Absolutely. I'll do whatever you want."

"Good," she nods curtly. "Twelve o'clock sharp in front of the house." And with that she disappears from the room, the giant eagle fluttering after her.

As they trudge through the dense forest Remus struggles to keep his heartbeat at a reasonable pace, fingers constantly playing with his wand, reminding him it's there. He rarely uses it here, except when he's teaching the kids. He learned early on that any casual displays of magic make the people of Lupercal uncomfortable. But it leaves him feeling ill prepared for this meeting. Rusty. It doesn't help that it's so close to the full moon, all his senses over ripe. Every smell and sound and branch brushing against his skin ten times more intense.

"It'll be alright," Gabe says quietly. They're walking side by side, Mia and Alexandra up ahead. Gabe brushes the back of Remus's hand with his and then pulls away.

"Have you met him before?" Remus asks, happy to find his voice doesn't betray the boiling cauldron of fear and anxiety he feels on the inside. He isn't ready for this moment. It's come too soon. Too suddenly. He's wondered for years what he would do if he ever came face to face with the man who did this to him. He still doesn't have an answer.

"Once," Gabe says grimly, "like this. He has followers but not like Mia. He wants her support."

Something crawls under Remus's skin. "Support for what exactly? Attacking fucking children?"

Gabe doesn't answer right away, teeth biting his lower lip. "It's a bit more...complicated than that."

Which is not at all what he was expecting Gabe to say, and Remus feels his feet stumble. "What is complicated about it? He's a monster."

He sees Gabe flinch at the use of the word. "I—I'm not saying he isn't. I'm just...I'm just saying it's complicated."

Remus wants to push him on this but it's at that moment that they step through a particularly thick patch of bush into a small open area, Mia and Alexandra coming to a stop.

"We're meeting him here?" Remus murmurs, looking around at the surrounding trees as though expecting Greyback to jump out at them, his nerves accelerating again, bouncing against the walls of his skin, turning his stomach.

"We're meeting him here," Gabe nods.

They stand in silence, Remus vibrating, passing the weight back and forth between his feet, too nervous to interrogate Gabe, too nervous to speak period. He has faint memories of Greyback, nothing solid, nothing concrete. He's done his best over the years to scrub those memories from his head. Taking bleach and wire brushes to them. He wants them faded. And worn. And distant. Wants to be able to look back at them without feeling. Like they happened to someone else. Because they did really, in the end. They happened to a boy who was whole.

But the pieces of Greyback he has—rough voiced, huge, leather skinned, swelling black eyes—those images haunt him. His constant nightmare. The face he sometimes sees right before

he turns. The one he is always afraid will be waiting for him the next time he looks in the mirror.

“Oh honestly,” Mia says suddenly, snapping Remus out of his thoughts. He’s so jumpy that he actually startles, Gabe sending him a concerned look that he tries to wave off, shaking out his shoulders and settling himself.

“You need to tell him to cut that shit out,” Alexandra mutters, “It’s fucking embarrassing. And...tacky.”

Remus isn’t sure what they’re talking about until Gabe elbows him, nodding above. There, in the sky, Remus can see two eagles, like the one from this morning, circling above them.

“What’s with the birds?” he asks before he can stop himself.

Mia sighs, she’s standing facing the trees in front of them, feet slightly apart, shoulders squared, hands clasped behind her—looking every inch the general. “He’s being poetic.”

“He’s being a tosser,” Alexandra corrects, causing Gabe to snort.

Remus looks up again and then back down. “I—sorry I’m still kind of lost?”

“Eagles,” Mia says wearily. “Are one of the ways that Muggles used to think the gods were communicating with them. They would be sent by Zeus to deliver messages, not literal messages of course, more...metaphorical ones.”

This all sounds mad to Remus. “I’m sorry—so he thinks he’s a God?”

“Well I’m certainly not a man.”

Remus’s head snaps towards the trees, heart running head first into his ribs at the sound of that voice. He hears screaming.

He sees claws.

And stained sheets.

A pair of children’s pyjama’s ripped.

Teeth and teeth and teeth.

“Hello Fen,” Mia says wearily as a hulking figure pulls himself out of the shadows. Just behind him are two others—a woman and a man. They’re all dressed similarly but not identical. In black clothes, and heavy boots, looking a little worse for wear though in a way that makes it hard to tell whether it’s on purpose or not.

Greyback smiles and Remus notices that his teeth aren’t right, like his jaw is too big for his face, his canines too sharp. Wolf’s teeth, he realizes. Fuck, is it possible to choose to only partially transform? He looks briefly at Gabe and then back at Greyback. This isn’t the time

for questions but Merlin it would be really nice if at some point in his life someone had thought to tell him a thing or two about fucking werewolves.

“Mimi, always a pleasure.”

Alexandra snorts, bringing his attention to her. “Alex,” he dips his head in acknowledgement, “I see you’re still a raging bitch.”

When she smiles she has almost as many teeth as Greyback. “Right back at you.”

“You wanted to talk,” Mia cuts in, sounding like someone already reaching the limits of her patience. “So talk.”

Greyback does not appear at all deterred by her terse tone. “How’s our little Charlotte doing?”

A growl rumbles in Gabe’s chest at the same moment that Alexandra indignantly shouts “Are you fucking kidding me?”

But Mia raises her hand, waving Alexandra off, eyes firmly on Greyback. “I’m not here to play games. Say your piece or we’re leaving.”

The woman behind him growls, eyeing Mia with dislike, but when she moves towards her Greyback calls her off the same way Mia did with Alexandra. It feels a bit like the two leaders are talking without opening their mouths.

“I’ve had an offer from the Dark Lord,” Greyback says eventually.

Remus’s heart trips. This is exactly what Moody and Dumbledore had been afraid of.

Alexandra snorts. “Lord? Really? You know, you never struck me as a monarchist Fenrir.”

Remus expects him to get angry, disrespecting Voldemort isn’t something most Death Eaters take lightly. But Greyback doesn’t seem to care. In fact he grins, causing the white scars crisscrossing his face to become more visible. They distort him in an unpleasant way and Remus can’t help but wonder if his scars do the same.

“I’m anything for the right price baby.”

Alexandra makes a revolted face. “Say baby again and I’m going to lose my breakfast.”

Greyback opens his mouth as if to retaliate but Mia cuts him off. “Get to the point Fen,” she snaps. “What did he offer and what in the hell does it have to do with us?”

“He’s willing to promise werewolves fair treatment under his rule,” Alexandra snorts again but this time Greyback ignores her and keeps going. “The laws against us will be struck down and we’ll be allowed to work Ministry jobs, to campaign for spots on the Wizenmagot, allowed to vote.”

“We can’t vote?” Remus hisses. Gabe just gives him a look. A “this is not the time but also how the hell did you not know that” look. Surely his father should have mentioned this? Of course, that would have meant acknowledging that Remus was a werewolf. Which Lyall Lupin rarely, if ever, allowed himself to do.

“But only if you can bring him enough people right?” Mia asks, sounding bored. “That’s why you’re here? You don’t have enough supporters to make it worthwhile for him on your own?”

“Oh don’t play coy, this is everything you’ve ever wanted. You could even get your old job back,” he gives her a grin.

“Our lives for there’s then,” Mia says. “The Muggle borns are stripped of their rights and we get to fill their places?”

“That’s how the world works Mia,” he says undeterred. “People always think it’s a climb to the top but no one is ever actually getting any higher, they’re just pushing everyone around them lower.”

“That’s a depressing outlook to have.”

Greyback tilts his head ever so slightly to the side. “And how is the moral high ground working out for you?” he asks, voice pleasant but with a sharpness beneath his words. “Have they started listening yet? I mean, surely they must have, when you ask them so nicely. Oh please Mr. Minister Sir, I promise I’m such a good little werewolf, I never do anything wrong, please let me have a job.”

The woman behind him laughs.

Mia says nothing, watching his mockery of her with an unreadable expression.

“After all your letter writing and meeting having and civility Lupin is still gonna pass his law,” Remus cringes at the mention of his father. “And all this,” Greyback waves behind them, “is going to be taken away.”

“It’s not going to pass,” Mia says finally, voice solid as a fortress wall. “And if it does we’ll fight it.”

Greyback laughs. “Fight it? Come on Mia, you can’t fight it. Not the way you want to. We have both lost enough people to know that, haven’t we?” and when Mia goes silent again, he takes a step closer, causing all of them to tense, Alexandra reaching for the hilt of the dagger Remus now sees resting at her hip.

“Aren’t you tired of burying all your friends?” he asks in a low voice.

It’s clear that there is a history here that Remus wasn’t aware of, but he can’t quite figure out what it is. Can’t quite see the shape of their relationship.

“So what are you suggesting Fen? Huh? That we run around attacking children?” she spits back at him.

There is the flicker of something like hurt in his dark eyes. It surprises Remus, but it's gone so quickly he hardly has time to process it.

"Come now, aren't you the one always preaching about how it's not a curse? I'm just embracing my nature. Werewolves hunt the young, we always have, it's in our blood. You know the histories—Burgot, Verdun, Garnier, our forefathers," he laughs cruelly, clearly aiming to hurt, holding his arms out wide. Remus notices the claws at the ends of his fingers. "I'm being free Mia, isn't that what you wanted?"

"Is this the kind sermonizing that wins you supporters?" she asks dryly. "Because I have to admit, I'm finding it a little underwhelming."

"I'm giving these children a gift," he growls. "And I'm boosting our numbers at the same time. Win, win."

Remus's hands curl into fists. He isn't exactly sure when he slid his wand from his sleeve into his palm but his nails dig into the handle now. A gift. A fucking gift. He's shaking, Gabe periodically shooting him worried looks out of the corner of his eyes.

"Well," Mia goes on dryly. "I'm sure they're very grateful to have been ripped from their families. To have their lives irrevocably altered."

"Where's the love for your wolf now Mia, you hypocrite," he leers, but Mia is undeterred.

"I am not ignorant of the way the world works," she snaps back at him. "Whatever my views of Lycanthrope may be I know that many don't share them and that makes this life hard. I would never force it on anyone who did not ask for it," she says sharply. "A sentiment you used share."

That last sentence clearly stings. "We're dying Mia, we don't have time to hope that they change, we need to force them to. If their children are affected they will have no choice but to start listening to us. Kids are a good motivator, you of all people should understand that." "The abandoned children in my house would disagree with you," she says coldly.

Remus sees flashes of his father's face, the empty way he looked at him after the attack, the way he kept his distance, home as little as possible.

"Well if those sons of bitches are cold hearted enough that they'll abandon their own children what makes you think they're ever going to change their opinions for you?"

Mia shrugs. "I have hope. But I refuse to become the monster they all accuse me of being."

Greyback shakes his head, hand rubbing the stubble covering his jaw. "You're a monster to them either way. Nothing you do will make them see you any different. If we don't start fighting back they'll crush us. They're already crushing us," this last sentence is said under his breath.

"And you think Voldemort will be any different?" Mia asks. "He's going after the Muggle borns, what makes you think he won't turn on you next?"

“It won’t matter,” he says gruffly. “All we need is a chance, a chance to grow stronger. By the time he comes for us we’ll be able to defend ourselves.”

There’s a long pause and Remus starts to grow fidgety again, unable to tear his eyes away from Greyback. Memorizing every inch of him. He’s smaller than Remus remembers him, though he is, by no means, small. And despite the teeth and nails and scars, he is still made of flesh and blood, still human. At least in parts. That’s comforting, Remus thinks, to finally have his nightmare be something solid right in front of him. Something that can be fought. Destroyed.

“I don’t agree with your choices Fen, I’ve made that clear. I don’t agree with Voldemort either. I’ll not hurt others to further myself. Now get the fuck off my property.” Mia moves as if to turn away, back towards the house, but Greyback growls, lunging forward—which all the reason Remus needs to pull his wand.

Alexandra is moving too, dagger drawn from her belt, but Remus’s spell hits Greyback first, sending him slamming into the tree behind him, knocking the wind out of him. The man who was at his side lunges forward but Alexandra catches him, getting him on his knees, blade to his neck. Meanwhile, Remus fires off a curse at the female werewolf, ropes shooting from his wand, binding her up and sending her squirming to the ground.

Remus steps over her on his way to Greyback. He thinks he hears Gabe call out to him, maybe Mia too, but he pays no attention. Shoving the man in front of him back against the tree he’s trying to pull away from. Greyback has a few inches on Remus and probably a hundred pounds, but Remus has a wand. He jabs it right into the other man’s neck.

There’s a moment of bewildered confusion before Remus sees recognition in his dark eyes, a grin returning to his face. “Well, well, well, if it isn’t baby Lupin. You sure have grown up.” Remus is shaking, with fear, with anger, he can feel the stillness around them, as everyone watches, violence heavy in the air. “Tell me,” the man goes on, “does your daddy know where you are?” he laughs. “Merlin, I bet it fucking eats him up inside. I bet it rots his fucking soul.” The laughing continues.

“Shut. Up.” Remus punctuates his words by jabbing his wand further into Greyback’s neck. There’s no fear in the other man, which only serves to make Remus angrier.

“Tell me,” Greyback goes on, somehow still managing to speak even with Remus practically crushing his windpipe. “How does he do eh? How does he look you in the eye while he strips away your fucking rights? Your fucking freedom?”

He doesn’t.

Remus nearly says, the words trembling on his tongue.

He hasn’t in years.

“Remus,” Mia says from behind him, stepping closer, like she’s going to try and pull him away, except Remus isn’t done yet.

“You think you gave me a fucking gift?” he snarls through clenched teeth, forcing himself to look into Greyback’s eyes even though it makes the child in him scream in terror. “You ruined my life.”

“I didn’t ruin your life kid,” he says, like it’s nothing, like Remus means nothing. “That was your parents.”

“You don’t know shit about my parents,” he’s never wanted to kill anyone as much as he does right now. Like maybe if Greyback stops breathing this curse will let go of him. The teeth marks in his skin will disappear. And he’ll finally just get to be himself. Just Remus. Nothing special. Blissfully ordinary. It’s all he’s wanted since he was five years old.

“I know your father’s a right bastard.”

Remus can feel the wolf prowling under his skin. Ready to pull to the surface To come out. He wonders what would happen if he let go now, the way Gabe is always telling him to. He wonders if that would be enough to scare Greyback. Give him a taste of the fear he’s inflicted on so many others.

“Remus—” Mia tries again, but he cuts her off.

“You killed my mum.”

Greyback scoffs. “I never touched your mum.”

“You killed her, you made me this... this thing and it killed her. Knowing what my life would be like, knowing she couldn’t protect me. And I had a front row seat. I had to watch the life drain out of her knowing it was because of me,” his voice cracks, pathetic and painful. “You did that to her. To me. Fuck your politics I really couldn’t give a shit. You killed my mum. And if you think you’re walking out of these woods—“

“You gonna kill me baby Lupin?” Greyback interrupts, though Remus thinks there’s something different about his voice now. Something heavier. Darker. “Why don’t you do it like a man huh?” he pushes. “Put down the little wand and use your fucking teeth.”

And Remus thinks about it. Almost does it, in fact. It would be so fucking satisfying. To taste his screams.

“Remus,” Mia has her hand on his shoulder now, causing Remus to jerk, he hadn’t realized she’d gotten so close. “You have to let him go.”

“What? So he can go off and attack some other kid?” Remus feels like he’s coming apart. The moon.

His mum.

The screaming ringing in his ears.

His screaming.

Those black soulless eyes right in front of him. Taunting him. Boasting about what they've done. What they've taken.

"This stops now," Remus barely holds in a growl, not knowing if belongs to him or the wolf. "I'm stopping this now."

He's never killed someone.

But he reckons he could.

It's in his blood after all. Isn't that what Greyback said?

"I understand why you're upset—"

"Do you?" he snaps, because he highly doubts that, but Mia presses on.

"I need you to listen Remus," her voice remains steady, calm. "I need you to tap into that other part of yourself and listen. He isn't alone."

Remus doesn't understand, too far gone for anything but straight forward statements. "What are you talking about?"

But before she can answer Remus hears Gabe cursing behind them.

"How many do you count?" Alexandra asks.

"I hear six heartbeats," Gabe fires back.

"Heartbeats? What the hell are you talking about?" Remus repeats, not that he cares, not really. He should just do it. No point in talking about this. In stalling.

"Merlin, you really are repressed aren't you?"

"Shut up Fen," Mia snaps before Remus can. "He's brought others with him. They're hiding in the woods," she explains to Remus.

Remus shifts, feeling slightly uneasy. "Well, if they're anything like this lot," he nods to the two werewolves already on the ground. "I'm sure we'll manage."

"I don't think it's us they've been instructed to attack if things go wrong here," Mia says, still calm.

It takes a second for that to sink in. "The house," Remus finally hisses and Greyback has the audacity to smile at him. "But how would they even—"

"They can hear his heartbeat," Gabe answers before Remus can even finish the question. "The same way we can hear their's."

"Fuck," Remus curses, staring right into Greyback's eyes. "Fuck."

For a minute he pretends that he's still going to do it, pretends that he'll say the words and watch with delight as the green light zaps the life from Greyback's eyes. Pretends he could make it back to the house in time. That he could guarantee none of the kids would get hurt—more hurt than they already have been.

And then,

when he's done all his pretending,

he steps back.

"Good boy," Greyback leers, standing up and straightening out his shirt.

"C'mon," Mia grabs Remus's arm, pulling him away, causing him to wince.

"You really need to learn to control your pups Mia," Greyback laughs. Remus swears to god he's going to punch him but Mia has already spun around.

"One day Fen, when you aren't threatening my family, when I get you on your own, I will kill you. For what you've done. For who you've become," her eyes are as unwavering as her voice and more than any time before Greyback looks broken open by those words.

"Liar," he says, but his voice is quiet and Remus thinks uncertain. Nothing about Mia is uncertain.

"I guess we'll see," she turns back around. "Let's go, back to the house, now. And Fen, I mean it, you and your lot get off my property."

They head wordlessly back into the trees. Remus shaking, constantly checking over his shoulder, expecting Greyback or one of the other werewolves to come after them, but no one does. He tries to listen like the others seem to be able to, searching out heartbeats, but the only one he can hear is his own.

Gabe presses ever so lightly into his side. "I'll teach you," he says, like he can read Remus's mind. Remus just nods.

The walk back is slow and brutal. The moon is really starting to effect them and by the time they reach the house Remus's whole body is vibrating with pain. There are no children playing outside like their normally would be, no one lounging in the chairs on the front porch. There is something convenient, Remus realizes then, about feeling like shit with a bunch of other people who are also feeling like shit.

"I swear to God," Alexandra mutters as the four of them drag themselves into the kitchen.

"The next time he asks to meet on the full moon I'm stabbing first and asking questions second." Remus collapses into one of the chairs at the kitchen table, Gabe sitting next to him, Mia starting the kettle.

"I'm gonna take a nap," Alexandra says, chugging a glass of water before letting it clatter into the sink. "You need me for anything?"

Mia shakes her head, giving her a wane smile. It's about as tired as Remus has ever seen her. "No, go on, we'll debrief tomorrow."

"Joy," Alexandra says flatly, nodding at Remus and Gabe as she heads out of the back door, Remus's eyes unable to resist looking at the dagger still hanging from her hip. There's silence as they wait for the kettle to boil, Mia bringing them mugs of tea without even asking. Remus is grateful. There's something settling about the warmth of it. The familiarity.

"He wasn't wrong you know," Gabe breaks the silence finally, causing both Remus and Mia to snap their heads in his direction. He rolls his eyes. "Not about—obviously not about everything, I'm not saying we should start going after kids, but..." he trails off, looking at them expectantly. Neither Mia nor Remus fill in the blank and eventually Gabe sighs.

"We're at the mercy of the Ministry," he goes on. "They don't listen to us, they don't respect us, everyone else is afraid of us. We need...we need to do something. Something has to change."

"We are doing things," Mia says calmly, but Gabe only shakes his head.

"I'm not a little kid anymore," he says, eyes intense, giving Remus the impression this conversation has been had before. "You can't hide the truth from me. We aren't making progress. The laws against us are piling up and Greyback is right, we can't fight them with petitions and legal challenges. We need to get—"

"Violent?" she cuts him off, voice sharp.

He sighs, looking exhausted, a hand ghosting over his face. "I mean...yeah. At this point, maybe. They haven't left us with a whole lot of other options."

She eyes him for a long moment. Remus knows that they're especially close—Gabe and Mia—he's her second in command really, her successor, the one she'll leave the farm to when the time comes. There is a great deal of warmth in the way she looks at him now. Warmth and fear.

Eventually she turns to Remus, raising her brow, clearly waiting for an opinion. This moment is important. This moment is the reason he's here. To keep the wolves from going over to the other side.

"I think—" he exhales. "I think if you join Voldemort you'll never be able to forgive yourselves. They'll be no coming back from that, no getting out from under him, whatever Greyback says."

There's another pause and then Mia nods. "I agree."

Gabe makes a frustrated noise, "But it's not that simple, we—"

Mia hold up her palm and Gabe goes quiet instantly. "Like I said to Alex, we'll debrief tomorrow."

Gabe rolls his eyes, pushing his chair back from the table and getting to his feet. “Fine, I’m going to take a nap too then.” He lingers in the doorway, eyes on Remus, expecting him to follow.

Remus only nods at the mug between his hands. “Gonna finish my tea,” he says, answering the question no one asked. He watches Gabe’s eyes pass between him and Mia, before eventually nodding. Steps echoing on the stairs as he heads up to his room.

Remus stares back down at his mug, the heat quickly receding. He takes in a deep breath, aware that Mia is watching him. Waiting.

“You and Greyback?” he says finally, not entirely sure how to ask the question.

Thankfully, Mia seems to understand. “We were turned around the same time, kind of, grew up together in a way, I suppose. Figured out how to...manage all this,” she waves flippantly at the air. “There were a few years where we only had one another...hard years. But, well...” she trails off for a moment, something undeniably sad in her eyes. “As you can see, we’ve chosen rather different paths.”

Remus tries to take that in, tries to imagine a younger Greyback, perhaps one less willing to sink his teeth into people. Tries to picture him as the type of person you could call a friend. His imagination struggles.

“The names he mentioned, when he talked about attacking children being natural to us, in our blood...”

“Ah,” Mia says knowingly. “Yes, some very famous werewolves, all French actually. The French wolves have always been a tad more flamboyant.”

“And they were...like Greyback?”

She meets his gaze. “In a sense.”

It feels like something is crawling under his skin, slithering around his spine, the sense of unease and anxiety growing. Though he doesn’t know if that’s from the moon or Greyback.

“Do you think he’s right?” Remus asks finally, throat tight.

“Right?”

“Do you think it’s in our blood?”

Sirius, James and Peter have never talked much about what it’s like to watch Remus transform. He knows that there are moments when they’re nervous, frightened, but to his face they’ve never—nothing changed. He’d thought it might, after the first time they came to the Shack, but it didn’t. They didn’t even bat an eye. Too excited to have pulled it off in the first place.

But Snape.

Snape never looked at Remus the same after that night. And for the first time in a long time it had made Remus wonder if he really was a monster. If Dumbledore had made a mistake.

There's a long pause before Mia speaks again.

"Do you know the story of your name?" she asks, pulling Remus from his memories.

He blinks at her, brain moving a bit slowly. "Lupin?" he asks, laughing dryly. "Derived from lupus, latin for wolf, believe me, the irony isn't lost on me."

She smiles gently. "Not your last name, your first name."

That takes him by surprise. "I—no, I never—I think it was mother's choice. Something from a book I always figured, she liked to read."

Mia nods. "Romulos and Remus were the founders of Rome. So the myths say anyway."

He stares blankly back at her, not knowing at all what to do with that information. Mia seems to have expected this response, or lack thereof, and continues unprompted.

"They were twin brothers, their father a god, their mother of noble blood, and the King of the city they were born in was worried that they might pose a threat to his rule. So he ordered them killed."

Remus grimaces. "Bit harsh."

"Very harsh," Mia agrees with a small smile. "So the guards brought them to the river but they couldn't quite bring themselves to commit the actual physical act of infanticide, so they left the babies on the bank. Thinking they would be washed away and drowned or eaten by some animal."

"Jesus."

Mia laughs. "Yes, humans can be rather callous when it serves them—Muggles and Wizards both."

"But they didn't die?" he presses.

Mia shakes her head. "They were saved, by a wolf who couldn't ignore the crying of children."

Well, that was not exactly how Remus saw this story going. "A wolf?"

"A she-wolf came to them, saved them from the riverbank, bringing them back to her cave where she nursed them and protected them until eventually a farmer found them," Mia sips her tea before reaching across the table and taking Remus's hand, giving it a squeeze.

"You see Remus, there is good and bad in all things. In all life. In all people. We all have histories we would rather we did not, but we get to decide what shapes us. We get to decide who we want to be, what parts of ourselves we want to act on. For me, wolves are not the

monsters under the beds of children. They are the mothers, protecting and caring for them. That is what is in my blood.”

Her eyes are bright, holding onto Remus just as firmly as her hand. And he realizes, suddenly, that he’s missed this. Missed this desperately. Having a mother.

“So you tell me Remus,” she goes on eventually, gaze no less intense. “What is in your blood?”

He doesn’t want her to let go.

“I don’t know,” he practically whispers. Because he really doesn’t. He has spent so much of his life trying to keep everything in, everything under control, that he has no idea who is when he lets go. No idea who he is when he is free. The other day was only a taste. And it was terrifying. And intoxicating. And he wants more.

He thinks he might see disappointment in Mia’s eyes but she only smiles, thumb brushing over the back of his hand before she eventually lets go. Remus misses the reassurance of her touch almost immediately.

“That’s alright, you’re young, you have plenty of time to figure it out.” She gives him a wink. “Go, you look exhausted, rest, and I’ll see you tonight.”

He is exhausted, more so than he has been in a long time. Still, he’s reluctant to go. He’s only just gotten to the back door when she calls out to him again.

“The cave,” she says, eyes sparkling. “The cave the she-wolf took the babies to, it has a name. Can you guess what it is?”

The question feels so out of left field that for a moment Remus’s mind pulls a blank. And then: “Lupercal?”

Her smile widens. “Fate certainly does work in mysterious ways huh?”

He transforms under the night sky.

Transforms with the sharp crisp air of the woods in his lungs.

With Gabe at his side.

“Let go,” he breathes heavy, chest heaving, colour high in his cheeks, eyes blown wide. “Let go, let go, let go.”

And he does.

And he does.

And he does.

Oh how happy.

To feel dirt beneath his paws.

And pack nuzzling his fur.

Oh how happy to play.

To sing.

To chase.

They howl into the night and their voices mix together, reaching up above and tangling with the stars.

Oh how happy.

How happy.

To be wolf.

The next day is slow. It always is. Most of them remain in their rooms. But dinner is had together, as always. And though Remus is tired and sore, with a few cuts here and there, he feels better than he has in ages.

“Someone needs to separate you two,” Ava says as she falls into step with him and Gabe on their walk across the yard towards the main house. She’s clutching a travel mug to her chest. She has bags under her eyes and a split lip but otherwise she’s unmarked.

It’s something he’s noticed, about the wolves here, at least the young ones. The lack of scars. Gabe and Ava have barely any. When Remus asked Gabe about it he’d looked sad. “It isn’t normal you know, for wolves to hurt themselves,” he’d said. “It’s...almost an anxiety response. Happens when we’re alone. Trapped. We’re meant to have a pack.”

“Listen,” Gabe says now, half laughing. “This isn’t our fault,” he gestures at her lip. “You’re the one who got in the middle of us.”

“Well you were getting the kids all worked up, chasing one another like you were.”

“Aw Ava, don’t be jealous.” He reaches over and gives her a nuggie.

“Oi,” she swats at him with the hand not holding the coffee cup. “Get off you little—“

“Children,” Liam calls out, smiling from the doorway. “Don’t make me put you in time out.”

“Didn’t realize the whole daddy thing was a kink of yours Liam,” Gabe says, finally letting a very frazzled Ava go.

Liam's face goes beet red, mouth falling open in an expression that has Remus struggling not to laugh.

"Don't worry Liam," Gabe pats his arm as he scoots past him into the kitchen. "I don't judge."

Remus shoots Liam an apologetic look as he follows Gabe into the house.

"I hate him," he hears Ava say behind them.

"You keep telling yourself that," Liam replies.

Dinner is nice. A bit less energetic than normal perhaps but there's something so...warm about it. So comforting. No one fusses over him, no one sends him nervous looks. There's no need for him to feel self-conscious about the few scrapes on his face, no need to come up with excuses. People discuss the full moon like it's...normal. No big deal—small talk. This thing he's spent his whole life hiding with his every breath is here laid bare. It's...he's not sure he even has the words to describe it. What it means. How that feels, after all this time.

"Excuse me."

Remus's looks up to see Jack leaving the table early, heading out the front door. He's been quiet all day. Quiet since Remus got here honestly. Head down, eyes on the floor.

"I'll be back in a minute," Remus says, to no one in particular, Gabe and Ava once again engaged in an argument so intensely he probably could have grown wings and they wouldn't have noticed.

He walks outside, worried he waited too long, that he won't be able to find Jack. But thankfully, the kid is just sitting on the porch steps, staring out at the long driveway in front of him. Remus takes in a deep breath before stepping forward and sitting down next to him.

Jack instantly stiffens.

"When I was fifteen my friend—" his throat closes for a moment, hands shaking already. He holds onto his knees, neither him nor Jack looking at each other, but he knows the other boy is listening.

"When I was fifteen," he starts again, "my...friend, he told someone at school how to get to me on the full moon."

Jack hisses, like he's been burned. "Fuck," the word so soft Remus can barely hear him.

There is something strangely affirming about having him understand instantly, what that would mean. How much that would mean. Sirius will never know how vulnerable it is to transform. To be stripped down to your barest instincts and thoughts and desires. All he sees are claws and teeth. All he sees is brute strength. But that isn't how it feels. It feels...exposing.

“And this, this kid he told, he found me. Saw me. It—“ he closes his eyes briefly. He does his best not to go back here too often. Especially to those first moments, to the fear of seeing Snape in that doorway, the primal panic.

“Did you bite him?” Jack asks, staring at his hands.

“No,” Remus holds back a wince. “No I—my other—my—James, he showed up and he, he stopped it from going too far but I still attacked them. Attacked both of them. And I hurt them,” he silently curses the way his voice wobbles.

“Which is my way of telling you,” Remus pushes on. “That I get it, what you’re feeling, and that I don’t blame you, for what happened.”

There’s a long pause, but Jack doesn’t immediately get up and walk away so Remus assumes he hasn’t completely screwed this up. The teen boy picks at the fabric covering his knee, still not looking at Remus.

“It isn’t the same though,” he says finally, like explaining this is difficult.

“It isn’t?”

Jack frowns. “No one really has control of themselves on the full moon, but I—I should have been able to—“ he sighs, frustrated, shaking his head. “It shouldn’t have been like that for me. I should have been in control.”

God Remus really wants to give this kid a hug. “It was your first time, give yourself a break okay? It was a freak accident. It doesn’t make you...it doesn’t define you,” he struggles with his words. “That one moment isn’t who you are,” something he has told himself over and over again and never really been able to believe. He can only hope Jack has better luck.

“I just...” Jack sighs, scrubbing at his face. “I didn’t want that to be me, you know? I didn’t want to believe that it could be. I’ve never hurt anyone before.”

Remus smiles wanly. “I know, really I know. But it isn’t you. I promise.”

Jack snuffles. “But how can you say that? Because—because it was. Because I did that. I—“ his voice breaks and he turns his face away. Remus doesn’t know what to say. Doesn’t know how to comfort this kid when he can’t even comfort himself.

“I try so hard, you know? To be okay with it,” Jack goes on eventually, voice thick. “Not okay with what I did to you but just okay with...with what I am. The way the others are. But sometimes I just...” Remus can practically feel the pain pouring out of him. “I just really hate myself.”

If he was Mia or Gabe Remus thinks he would probably have something encouraging to say now. Something uplifting. And maybe he should have let them handle this instead because all that comes out of his mouth is: “Yeah,” rough and scratched. “Yeah me too.” They stay like that for a long time. Neither of them talking.

It's two days later that Remus wakes to screaming.

It's barely dawn, the sun only just coming up, Remus's room still cold and dark. He thinks he might be dreaming. That the screaming is his mother. It lingers sometimes, when he has nightmares about the attack. But he's barely pulled himself upright in bed before the door to his room is thrown open and two men come storming in.

Fear shoots through him and he tries to lunge for his wand on the bedside table but they get to him first. Grabbing hold of his t-shirt and throwing him into the wall, pulling his hands behind his back.

"What the fuck," he shouts, bucking and twisting, trying to pull himself free. Fighting's never really been his strong suit, not like this. That's really more James's area of expertise. Or Sirius's. Fucking Quidditch players.

"Who the fuck are you?" he's still tired and can't quite keep his voice from shaking. He thinks they might be with Greyback. Must be. And the idea of having to face that man with his hands bound behind his back and no wand makes Remus panic.

He struggles, noises drifting in from downstairs, from outside. He wonders where the kids are, if someone's with them. If they're safe. Wonders where Gabe is. Ava. Liam. He kicks and shakes and thrashes around but nothing works.

"Oh Merlins's—stay still you fucking mutt," the man holding him rips him away from the wall as his friend shoves a wand in Remus's face. Which...which doesn't seem right. Werewolves don't usually use wands. "Stay still or I'll curse your furry little balls off understood?"

For the first time Remus gets a good look at the man in front of him. He's in black like Greyback had been, but these are robes not street clothes, and they're fresh and crisp. Identical uniforms.

"Are you Death Eaters?" he asks, confused enough that he's stopped fighting. He doesn't recognize them and neither of them are wearing masks or baring their forearms so he can't tell. The man in front of him doesn't answer, instead he brings his elbow up and cracks it into Remus's face. Pain shoots through his jaw and he spits blood out onto the floor—he bit his tongue.

"Don't fucking speak to me," the man says. And then, presumably to his colleague who still has Remus bound. "Let's go, put him with the others."

Remus doesn't bother resisting as they drag him from the barn, his head still aching from that hit. He sees others, some look like they've been stunned, some being hauled across the lawn like him. He checks the sky but there's no sign of a Dark Mark and still there's not a mask in sight, though all the men and women are in identical black robes.

"Who are you?" Remus asks again.

The man holding his arms and shoving him forward delivers a jab to his lower back that causes Remus to stumble.

“He told you not to fucking speak.”

God Remus really wishes he hadn't gotten into the habit of sleeping without his wand. Back at the flat they always have them on their person now. Moody made it protocol and honestly, it's one of the few rules that even Sirius didn't bitch about. A bit uncomfortable but it makes you feel safer. He'd gotten too complacent here. He closes his eyes briefly, cursing himself.

The noise gets louder the closer they get to the main house. Remus thinks they're going to go inside but instead he starts being dragged towards the front lawn. He sees the cages first. Black bars, holding three or four people in each. People he knows. People he's been having dinner with every night for the past week.

He sees his father second.

Remus's feet stop working, causing the man behind him to almost trip over him. “What the fuck,” he mutters, shoving Remus forward, forcing him to move.

An icy cold sensation has descended on Remus.

“Dad?” he croaks. And then, louder. “Dad?”

Lyall Lupin's head turns and for the first time in years he looks at his son. And his eyes go wide, his apathetic mask cracking, replaced by something akin to horror, making Remus flinch.

“Dad?” the man holding him repeats. “What the fuck are you—“

“Let him go,” his father's voice comes out full of authority as he starts walking towards them, people turning to stare.

“Sir?”

“I said let him go,” there's no emotion in the command.

After a second Remus's arms are released, and he brings them around to his front, massaging his wrists.

“Go help the others,” Lyall says gruffly, the man nodding his head, eyes darting between father and son before heading off in the direction of the cages.

For a moment Lyall and Remus stand in silence, staring at one another, the only stillness in the chaos surrounding them.

And then; “Whatever you're doing you have to stop,” Remus manages to force his voice to work again, “they aren't—this isn't what you think. They aren't how you think.”

But he isn't sure his father even hears him, staring down at Remus like he doesn't recognize him. It makes him feel small. Like a child. Somewhere in the distance someone screams again, Remus thinks it's one of the little kids. He swallows with difficulty and presses on.

"They're good people, they're—I know how you feel about—but don't do this. I've never asked you for anything but I'm asking now. Don't do this to them." It's a struggle to get the words out, his voice jumpy and cracking all over the place.

Still Lyall is a wall of silence and disapproval.

"Sir!" someone calls from the front. "Sir we have a bit of a situation."

"I'm coming," Lyall yells back over his shoulder, eyes never leaving Remus.

"Please," he practically whispers. But it's no use. His father never did seem to care when he begged.

"Get out of here," Lyall says finally. "Apparate back to London, I'll make sure there's no record of your presence here."

Remus feels his heart sink. He could tell his father, of course, that the only reason he's here is because Moody told him to be. That he's working for the Ministry. The Order. But he doesn't want to. It would feel like a betrayal of everyone here who has shown him so much kindness. Besides, he isn't even sure if it's true anymore.

"Dad—" he follows as Lyall walks away towards the front of the house. "Dad, please," he sounds desperate and whinny. He wishes he could speak with some authority, wishes he didn't turn into a spineless little kid ever time his father was around. Afraid of being locked up in the basement, with the doors that burned to touch. "Dad—"

"What the hell do you think you're doing Lyall?" Mia's voice thunders across the lawn as she's dragged from the house.

"REMUS!"

He whips his head around to see Gabe being shuffled towards the cages behind him, Ava and Liam already inside, looking like they've taken a beating and also like they're trying to shrink away from the bars. Wolf's Bane, he realizes, they've covered the bars in Wolf's Bane.

"I'm not sure how many times this has to be explained to you," Lyall says, sounding haggard. "But the new laws state that there cannot be a gathering of more than two werewolves in a single location at any given time. Since you are all in clear violation of this law, the Ministry has seen fit to take action."

Remus feels his stomach drop. The law, his father's law, it passed.

"Oh don't you start with your legal bullshit," they're yelling at one another across the lawn, several feet apart, the men holding Mia clearly uncertain about whether or not they should keep dragging her towards the cages.

“You can’t just put laws into immediate effect that’s absurd, it’s goddamn tyrannical. It hasn’t even been passed a whole twenty-four hours. You have absolutely no right to do this!”

“On the contrary,” Lyall goes on, unruffled. “I have the complete support of the Wizenmagot. Your pack is seen as an immediate threat to the safety of the Wizarding world and therefore dismantling it is top priority.”

“This is a violation of our rights! It’s completely unconstitutional.”

But once again, Lyall is unfazed. “You seem to be mistaken. Werewolves have no civil rights, they are not seen as citizens under British Wizarding law. I am violating nothing.” He turns his attention to the men behind her. “Get her in a cage.”

Remus feels like he might be sick.

“Don’t do this,” he tries again, stepping in front of his dad. “I’m begging you, I’m begging as your son don’t do this.”

When Lyall turns his gaze on Remus it’s so cold he almost shivers. “I told you to leave.”

Remus opens his mouth when the screaming starts again, and that’s when he sees Charlotte. She looks terrified, grabbing for the Ministry Wizards, clinging to them as they try to push her away, try to tell her to go sit on the steps.

“You have to hold her,” Mia shouts as she struggles against the men attempting to stuff her in a cage. “She’s afraid, she’s just been attacked, she’s scared of being left on the ground.”

Charlotte is hysterical, it hurts to watch, to hear, and yet somehow the Ministry wizards look on without feeling. Because, of course, they don’t see a little girl. They see a werewolf.

Remus turns to his dad, but his face is expressionless.

“Are you really just going to stand there and do nothing?” he growls. “Really gonna let that little girl suffer?” Lyall doesn’t respond, watching the scene unfold with disinterest.

Remus laughs without humour. “Merlin, it’s a good thing I had mum there to look out for me, if this is how you treat us.”

His father’s head snaps towards him, eyes bright with fury. “Don’t you dare bring up your mother,” he says in a voice that is quiet and dangerous and far more frightening than yelling could possibly be. “She would be ashamed if she could see you now. Here. Throwing away everything we fought so hard to give you.”

It shouldn’t matter what he says. What he thinks. It’s not as though Remus respects him. And yet...

She would be ashamed if she could see you now.

Those words land like a punch to his gut, and Remus actually stumbles back from the force of them. He’s reeling so hard that he doesn’t hear what’s going on in the background. Mind

going momentarily numb until one of the Ministry goons starts shouting.

“What the fuck! What the fuck is she doing?”

Remus turns his head just in time to see Mia transforming, her jaw extending, her pupils blowing wide, her legs and arms growing long as claws sprout from her fingers. Throwing off the men trying to hold her back. The she-wolf who couldn't ignore the crying of children.

Remus barely has time to step forward, to raise his arm, to think the words “no” and “don't” before a man in black robes is pointing his wand right at her.

“Avada Kedavra.”

Remus's eyes instantly snap shut. A stupid little kid thing to do. But maybe if he doesn't see it then it never happened.

Silence seems to fall over them. Time stopping. And then. And then Gabe starts to scream.

“NO! NO! NO!”

Remus's eyes fly open again and he turns around to see his friend, not yet caged like the others, thrashing around, tears coming furiously to his eyes.

“NO,” he just keeps saying, sobbing, voice shattered as he stares helplessly at the woman who raised him. Who cared for him. Who gave him a life when no one else believed he deserved one.

“Get off of me! Get off of me!” he's growling, and Remus can already see it happening, already see where this is going. “Get the fuck off of me I swear I'm going to fucking kill you. All of you!”

Remus starts running, legs numb as he sees Gabe begin to transform himself.

“Don't,” he chokes out. “Gabe stop!” he practically runs into him, Gabe's eyes big and glassy when they find Remus.

“Help me, Remus you have to help me, we have to save her. You have to help me.”

Remus feels himself struggling not to choke. “I'm sorry Gabe, I'm so sorry—“

“No, no, don't—don't—“ Gabe stutters, thrashing around again, growling. “I'm gonna kill them. I'm gonna fucking kill them.”

“You can't Gabe, you can't,” he grabs hold of the other boy's face, forcing him to be still, forcing Gabe to look at him, wiping the angry tears away with his thumbs. “They have magic—they have wands—you can't fight them.”

Gabe shakes under his hands, it feels so twisted and wrong to see his happy face such a mess. “What difference does it make” he asks weakly. “Without her what difference does it make?”

Remus fights the urge to scream, to crumble and curl in on himself. How could this have happened? How could this have happened?

“The others—they need you,” he manages to say, still cradling Gabe’s face, trying to be gentle, trying to be strong, trying to be any use at all. “You can’t leave them now Gabe, you can’t.”

A whimper escapes the other boy’s mouth as he begins to sob in earnest, like the anger has left him and all that remains is the unbearable sadness of losing the one person you never wanted to live without.

“What are you waiting for?” Remus flinches at the sound of his father’s voice. “Lock him up. We’re done here.”

The men start dragging Gabe towards the cages again.

“Remus—“ he says weakly, sounding afraid for the first time since Remus has known him.

“No, wait, wait where are you taking them?” he goes to use his wand, to get the men off of Gabe, but of course he doesn’t have it. Instead he grabs their arms, tries to pull them away but he’s easily thrown to the ground. “No, please, stop,” he reaches for the closing cage door but the minute his hands touch the metal bars he’s burned, yanking them back with an agonized growl as the cage is locked.

He looks at the terrified faces of his friends, hand cradled against his stomach before he turns back to his dad. He doesn’t know where Charlotte has gone, he thinks he can hear crying still in the distance but he isn’t sure. In the periphery of his vision is Mia’s body but he doesn’t let himself look there.

“Dad,” he stumbles forward, feeling so completely at a loss for what to do. “Listen, I’m begging you to listen.”

“You aren’t being arrested as a favour to me,” Lyall says, looking out at the cages in front of him. “It is the last favour I will be doing you.” Finally his eyes find Remus’s again. “You aren’t my son. You haven’t been for a very long time.”

Since you were five, is what he doesn’t say. Since before Greyback got his teeth in you.

“And whose fucking fault is that?” he finds himself spitting back.

Lyall gives him one last look over before whistling to his team. “We’re Apparating in three —“

“Apparating?”

“Two”

“Wait, Apparating where?” Remus looks frantically at the cages. “Where are you taking them?”

“Three.”

Of all the things that magic has accomplished. Perhaps nothing is quite so devastating, as how easy it makes it for people to disappear.

He's does find them, eventually.

They're taken back to the Ministry. He'd been worried at first that his father would bring them to Azkaban, but apparently they aren't actually planning on holding them. Instead the adults are interrogated. For hours. Moody says he can't stop it, that Lyall Lupin has been granted special permission and a task force to carry out this exact mission. The Auror's are not involved, and therefore it is out of Moody's hands. Not that he seems overly disapproving of Lyall's actions.

No one is allowed to return to the farm.

No one is allowed to see each other.

Tracking spells are fixed on all the werewolves.

It takes him a while, but eventually Remus finds the room they're questioning Gabe in and despite numerous people telling him repeatedly that he isn't allowed to be there, he sits down on the floor outside the door and he waits.

And waits.

And waits.

His head grows heavy and he ends up resting his forehead on his knees, the adrenaline completely gone from his system, leaving him worn out and exhausted and wanting to go home more badly than he has in a long time. Wanting to be in his bed. With his Padfoot. Wanting to hear Sirius laugh and tell him he loves him.

He knows he doesn't necessarily deserve any of that. But fuck does he need it.

“Waiting for me?”

Remus's head pops up as Gabe collapses onto the floor next to him. He looks about as awful as Remus feels.

“You okay?” he asks, before cursing himself. Stupid question.

Gabe laughs without humour, running a hand over his face. “No,” he croaks, staring at the wall across from them. “Not even a little bit.”

Remus feels his heartbreak. “Gabe—“

“You know they just left her body there?” he says, voice shaking with barely contained rage. “I asked them and they didn’t even seem ashamed, fucking happy to tell me. Left her there like she was nothing. Roadkill. You think there’s anyway they would leave a wizard like that? I mean even if they’d committed the most heinous crime I bet you they would still have the respect to collect their fucking body. Still recognize their humanity enough to do that much.”

Remus reaches out, squeezing Gabe’s arm.

“She tried so hard,” he presses on, voice cracking, “to play by their rules, to do everything the right way, everything they asked. And what did it matter? In the end? What did it get her?” He drops his head like he’s trying to catch his breath, trying to hold onto himself.

“I know,” Remus finally says into the quiet of the hallway. “I’m sorry. Fuck Gabe, I’m so sorry.”

After a minute Gabe nods, a new determination flickering across his face. “I’m taking Greyback up on his offer.”

Remus’s hand pulls back like he’s just been burned. “What?”

“I’m done trying to show them I’m not a threat,” he looks at Remus now, dead in the eye. “It’s time to start showing them that I am.”

A chill runs down Remus’s spine. “Gabe, that’s not—not Greyback, c’mon, he’s a monster.”

But Gabe only shakes his head. “You’re thinking like them.”

“Them?” Remus repeats. “Who the hell is them?” Gabe looks at him like that’s a stupid question and Remus guesses that under the current circumstances it might be. “It’s not that simple Gabe. There are Wizards who aren’t like this, who don’t think like—“ my father, he can’t quite bring himself to say. “There are Wizards out there who support us.”

“Are there?” Gabe asks disbelievingly. “Then where the fuck are they Remus? Why are they never around when we need them? What the hell are they doing?”

And Remus doesn’t know how to answer those questions. Doesn’t know if he has any answers. Eventually Gabe gets to his feet, looking down at him with sad eyes.

“88 Clements Avenue,” Gabe says, unprompted.

Remus blinks up at him. “What?”

“That’s where I’ll be, if you change your mind.”

“Change my mind?” he repeats slowly.

Gabe sighs. “About whose side you really want to be on,” he laughs weakly. “Or about who’s on your side, I guess.”

He starts walking away, leaving Remus feeling lost. Out at sea. Drifting. Everyone drifting. “Gabe—fuck, Gabe wait—what about the kids?”

But Gabe doesn’t stop. “Orphanages, they’re splitting them up,” he says coldly. “Can’t have more than two werewolves in one place. Goes for kids too, turns out.”

Remus should stop him but he doesn’t know how. He should fix this but he doesn’t know how. He feels small and useless as he watches Gabe walk away.

As desperately as Remus wants to go home and sleep for days, weeks, months. He doesn’t. Instead he finds himself in Moody’s office, Dumbledore and Moody sitting across from him as he recounts everything that has happened over the last week.

He’s grown to hate these meetings.

“Can’t we stop this?” he asks at the end, looking desperately at the two men in front of him and feeling infuriatingly like a kid back in school, called to the Headmasters office. “I mean how the hell did this fucking law even get passed?”

“I don’t know if you’ve noticed boy,” Moody says gruffly, “but we’re in the middle of a war here. We don’t exactly have time for petty politics.”

Remus stares at him. People have died. Children have been traumatized. He’s not sure he would call this petty.

“So we can’t do anything then? That’s what you’re saying? This is completely out of your hands?” he looks very pointedly at Dumbledore then.

“At the moment, yes, but I share your indignation Remus. When we aren’t spread so thin, I’ll speak to my allies on the Wizengamot, we’ll have a second vote. I think there’s a good chance of getting the law repealed.”

Remus tries to process that, a headache pulsing behind his eyes. He can’t remember the last time he ate or drank anything. Honestly he isn’t even sure what time it is.

“When we aren’t spread so thin,” he repeats finally. “You mean when the war is over?” if the war is ever over, which these days he’s no longer confident it will be.

Dumbledore bows his head in confirmation and Remus grits his teeth, doing his best not to lose his temper.

“The kids,” he manages finally. “Gabe said they’ll be put in orphanages?”

“That’s right.”

“Separate Orphanages?”

Another nod.

“Is there no way to keep them together? Not even the kids?”

“No,” Moody replies gruffly. “There’s nowhere with enough space first of all. Secondly, we can’t be saddling Muggles with an entire pack of werewolf cubs. One is already more than enough.”

His headache seems to grow stronger, he swears he can feel the veins pulsing in his temple. “They’re being put in Muggle orphanages?” he asks numbly.

“The only kind there are.”

Remus supposes he should have known that but, truth be told, he’s never thought much about orphanages. “What will happen, on the full moon?”

“They’ll be brought to the Ministry.”

Remus is too tired to hide his flinch. They’ll be put in cells. Alone and scared. They’ll tear themselves apart. He thinks of Ava and Gabe and Liam, about how whole they seemed. How smooth their skin was. These kids will be covered in scars. He looks down at his own hands, at the white lines on his knuckles.

“I’m going to tell Sirius,” he says suddenly. “I’m going to tell him what happened.”

I need to tell him, he doesn’t say.

This was too much.

I can’t keep it all in.

I’ll break.

I’m already breaking. “You can’t do that Remus.”

Still staring at his hands, he curls them into fists, watching the scars pull tight. “I trust him.”

“Do you?”

He looks up, meeting blue eyes behind half-moon spectacles. He doesn’t speak though, the words on the tip of his tongue. Sitting in his mouth.

Yes. I do.

Of course I do.

He doesn’t know why he doesn’t say them.

“I was there that night,” Dumbledore goes on slowly, “when James carried Severus’s unconscious body into the infirmary. He had claw marks on his back, James that is. According to Poppy they were quite deep.”

Remus recoils, pressing back into his chair. James. God James.

“I was there too, in the office, when James said that Sirius smiled, when he told him what he’d done.”

For the second time that day Remus feels like he’s going to be sick.

“So I’ll ask you again,” Dumbledore is relentless. “Do you trust him? Are you sure?”

Once again Remus doesn’t answer. He doesn’t want to. Can’t bear to. Unwanted memories pulling and poking at his chest.

“Well, now that that’s settled,” Moody goes on briskly. “You said the boy gave you an address?”

It takes Remus a minute to get his thoughts in order enough to understand what Moody is talking about. “Gabe?” he finally realizes.

Moody nods. “You’re gonna go to him, tell him you changed your mind, that you want to join Greyback as well.”

“The hell I am!”

“Remus,” Dumbledore says firmly, like a disappointed parent. “This is important. It has never been about your personal feelings but about attempting to keep as many werewolves as possible from turning to Voldemort.”

“But Greyback has already chosen Voldemort,” Remus says desperately. He can’t imagine being forced to spend time with him. To listen and look and smell him. He can’t imagine having to see him fully transformed. The thought alone makes Remus start to feel panicky.

“Then convince his followers to do otherwise,” Moody snaps. “Or if you can’t do that at least keep us informed on their plans. Their whereabouts.”

Remus folds forward, dropping his head into his hands. He hates this. Hates this with every fibre of his being. He’s tired of it. The secrets and the disappearing and the double life. It’s too hard. He’s too exhausted.

“Okay, fine, whatever,” he sighs, sitting back. “Can I go now?”

Moody looks like he’s going to say something but Dumbledore cuts him off. “Yes, of course. We’ll be in touch.”

“Great,” he gets out of his seat, heading for the door, but he stops before leaving. “The law says no more than two werewolves together in one place correct?”

Dumbledore nods, though Remus can see the question in his eyes. “That’s correct.”

Remus holds his gaze with intent. “There are two boys, Oliver and William, I want them to be kept together. I want you to do that for me.”

“Do that for you?” Moody says indignantly. “What in the seven hells makes you think we have—“

But Dumbledore holds up his hand, never taking his eyes off of Remus. “Very well,” he says after a brief pause. “The boys will be kept together. You have my word.”

“Thank you,” Remus says curtly, not bothering with anything else before he pushes into the hallway outside.

It’s one in the morning by the time he gets back to the flat. Sirius is on the couch, reading, his shoulders tense when Remus shuts the door but he doesn’t turn around. Doesn’t look up. Remus doesn’t blame him. He drops his bag on the floor, hesitantly walking forward. He feels so fucking hollow. Like he’s barely processed anything that’s happen. Can’t believe it’s only been a day.

“There’s leftover takeaway in the fridge,” Sirius says when Remus just keeps standing there, unsure of what to say. Unsure of how to ask for what he needs. “It’s from the curry place you don’t like, but, well, I didn’t know when you were coming back so—“

“Sirius.”

Sirius’s eyes flick up immediately at the sound of his name. At the pathetic whimpering thing that Remus’s voice has become. One look and he’s dropping his book, getting to his feet.

“What is it?” Sirius asks as his hands come up to Remus’s face, holding it carefully. “Remus what happened?”

The tears start falling from his eyes and he knows they aren’t going to stop. He shakes his head. “I can’t, I can’t fight right now, can we not fight right now? Because I just—fuck I just need—“

Sirius pulls him close, hand going to the back of Remus’s head, letting him burying his face in Sirius’s neck. Breathing him in, feeling his warmth. He shakes as the tears keep coming.

“Rem,” Sirius says softly.

“I’m so tired,” he hiccups. “I’m so tired of letting everyone down. I can’t do this Sirius. I don’t know how to do this anymore.”

“Sh, sh,” Sirius maneuvers them onto the couch, pulling Remus into him and wrapping them up in the blanket thrown over the back. “It’s okay. You’re okay.”

But he isn’t.

He really isn’t.

He buries himself further into Sirius. He shuts his eyes and he tries to pretend that everything is different. That he never got bit by a werewolf. That Sirius never told Snape how to find

him. That neither of them ever lied. Or cheated. Or left. He pretends that this is their life, together like this, in their flat. Holding one another.

He isn't okay.

Really he isn't.

A few days later, for reasons he'll never quite understand, Remus feels compelled to look up the story Mia told him. Romulus and Remus. Founders of Rome.

It turns out she forgot a rather important detail in her retelling.

That Remus was betrayed. Murdered by his brother.

Fate works in mysterious ways, that's what Mia had said.

Remus can't help but find that foreboding.

Chapter End Notes

Hey, hi, hello!

1) Chapter 50 is all James and Reg and Chapter 51 is Jegulus so I promise I am not leaving you guys hanging much longer!

2) Okay my reverse slow burn comment seems to have sparked a heck of a lot more debate than I was anticipating. The ending is still canon, just so we're clear, still canon, so I am gently suggesting we manage our expectations

3) I promise I will not take this long to update again, this was a lil extreme

THANK YOU ALL!!!

Chapter 50

Chapter Summary

HAPPY JEGULUS WEEK

Chapter Notes

Given recent events I just wanted to say that this story is currently taking place during a war and that might be particularly difficult for some people to read about at this point in time so please take care of yourselves!

tw: Drug use / addiction (via potions)

tw: Violence

tw: Panic attack

tw: Referenced sexual assault (there's also a moment where Lucius and Reg are alone together in this chapter and nothing happens but it definitely feels uneasy, if that makes sense? It takes place in the kitchen at Malfoy Manner just so you're prepared)

tw: Death (I don't think this counts as a major character death...but...it might...)

Just a heads up because some people do get angry about this, I've mentioned it before, but I am messing with the canon timeline, just because, in this story, it's more interesting if stuff happens while Regulus is still alive. Y'know? So yeah, that happens :)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

PART I JAMES

James, Peter and Sirius sit squashed together on a floral patterned sofa with lace pillows—one of which, is currently being cuddled by Peter. The living room they're in is overcrowded, with people, yes, but also with stuff. And James really does mean stuff. Boxes and newspapers and old takeaway menus.

Oh.

And cats.

How could he forget the cats.

There are at least three that he's seen walking around, all of whom seem to be in love with Sirius for reasons he can't fathom. The rest are staring out at them from their portraits which

are hung up throughout the house. On top of all that, the whole place smells a bit like boiled cabbage.

“The following information has been kept from most of you for the past few months in the interest of your safety.”

Dumbledore’s words instantly ignite a wave of murmuring across the room. None of the three boys on the sofa react, all well aware of what is coming. Though Peter does fidget ever so slightly, clutching his pillow a little closer to his chest.

“It has come to light that there is someone amongst us who has been passing information to Lord Voldemort.”

“What?” says a panicked voice at the back of the room, the murmurs escalating to more of a frantic buzz.

“I know this will be a shock to many of you. We were hoping to use this information to our advantage, to allow the individual in question to believe nothing was suspected, leading them to act more carelessly. However, as time has passed and no one has been found out, it has become more and more pertinent for all of you to be on your guard. To take seriously our requests that all knowledge of missions and tasks performed for the Order remain only between those actively involved in them.”

James doesn’t miss the guilty looks bouncing around the room. None of them have done a particularly good job of keeping information from each other. Except maybe Moony. James shoots a cautious look at Sirius but he seems to be focusing the entirety of his attention on the black cat purring next to him.

“Alastor will brief you on what behaviour to watch out for in the people around you. If you notice anything, I implore you to bring it to the attention of myself or the Head Auror.”

Moody groans, rising out of his seat to address the Order members able to attend the meeting today. Remus isn’t there, off doing god knows what. Sirius is positive he’s trying to get the werewolves to join their side but James isn’t entirely convinced. Alice and Frank are both back at the Ministry—the security measures there have been increased astronomically. And Lily and Marlene are on a mission, though, of course, they weren’t able to tell anyone where they were going or why.

Before she left James had suggested that Lily should perhaps stop taking Order missions now that she’s literally growing a baby. That suggestion did not go over well, though he still feels like he sort of has a point.

“...someone who is frequently unreachable,” Moody is babbling on, James barely paying attention. “Whose behaviour in the past few months has altered, who’s started disappearing without explanation, or anyone to corroborate where they were or what they were doing. Often times this sort of double life starts to take a toll physically—if someone seems more ill than normal, weaker, less social. Like they’re trying to distance themselves. If they start expressing guilt for unknown reasons. These are all warning signs, things to look out for, and if you notice more than one of them in a single individual please come to see me in my

office, do not,” Moody narrows his eyes, “I repeat, DO NOT send an owl, the post is unreliable and too easily intercepted.”

“Yes, thank you Alastor,” Dumbledore says, the faintest hint of amusement in the corner of his eyes.

The room around them has gone dead silent, perhaps the quietest James has ever heard an Order meeting before. Everyone, no doubt, running through a list of all their closest friends, trying to figure out if any of them match the description Moody has just given.

“Any questions?” Dumbledore asks after a short pause. No one raises their hand. “Excellent. Well, I imagine you are all eager to return to your homes, and I’m sure Arabella would love it if we would depart from her’s. Thank you for all your hard work, I’ll see you all again soon.” He smiles. James doesn’t know if anyone smiles back.

These meetings are strange nowadays. He finds himself waiting sometimes, for his parents to walk through the door. For his mother to pull them all into a hug and get lipstick on James’s cheek. For his father to watch on fondly, quieter and calmer but no less warm. He waits for that feeling of certainty that always filled him whenever they were around, the weight lifting from his shoulders. Because the adults were there. And surely they would take care of things.

The weight never lifts these days. But maybe that’s just what it feels like to grow up.

The room is slowly emptying. People going outside to Apparate since Mrs. Figg doesn’t have a Floo connection. Some people still linger, small groups huddled along the walls, catching up since the last time they saw one another, taking stock of the damage—who’s been injured, killed, taken. James, Peter and Sirius, however, say nothing. The three of them too tired to speak. Too tired to move. This winter is feeling long and it hasn’t even started yet.

“Did it—“ Peter starts and then stops, looking at the pillow in his lap and fiddling with the lace.

James waits for a moment, but when Peter doesn’t continue on his own he decides to give him a push. “Did it what?”

Peter chews on the inside of his cheek. “Well...it’s just that—I’m not saying it is or anything—I’m just saying, it sounded a bit like...”

“Just spit it out Peter,” Sirius says, now petting two cats. You’d think him being a dog would make them automatically dislike him but apparently his charm works on animals as well as people.

“When Moody was describing everything to look out for...did it sound a bit like he was describing Remus to either of you?”

Sirius freezes. He doesn’t look up, doesn’t speak, just goes deadly still.

James has somewhat of the opposite reaction. “Tell me you’re joking right now?” he asks, anger edging into his voice as he watches Peter’s cheeks flush.

“I told you, I’m not saying he is I’m just saying...well, the similarities were a bit hard to miss weren’t they?” he now looks over at Sirius who still hasn’t moved. James isn’t even sure if he’s breathing.

“Pete can you give us a minute?” James says finally, voice held tight.

Peter looks at him. “Give you...” then back at Sirius. “Oh—oh right, yeah,” he awkwardly stands, taking a step forward before realizing he’s still holding a pillow and placing it, somewhat delicately, back on the sofa.

Something is off. Sirius should be fuming—James should be holding him back, barely restraining him. Why is he just sitting there? Why is he—

“Pete’s right you know,” Sirius croaks.

James has to run those words through his head a few times before he’s finally able to accept that Sirius said them.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?”

There’s a beat.

“James—“

“No really, what the fuck is wrong with you? How could you even—“ he has to stop because his anger is getting to be too much, making his words shake as they cut their way out of his mouth.

To be fair, Sirius does look ashamed, staring at the floor, curled in on himself. Usually so big and bright, now wilting. James isn’t sure he’s seen him this defeated since fifth year.

“Tell me I’m wrong James,” his voice cracks. “Please. Because I hate it. I hate it too but...rationally—“

“Rationally?” James cuts in. “Since when are you rational?”

Somehow Sirius manages to make himself even smaller.

“It’s Remus,” James says, not understanding why he needs to explain this. “It’s Remus. Fuck reason, fuck every fucking similarity—“

“James—“

“It’s. Remus.”

Sirius sighs, dropping his head into his hands. A long moment of silence passes between them.

“I know,” Sirius says eventually, voice weak. “But I can’t stop...seeing it. Every time he lies. Every time he won’t tell me what he’s doing or where he’s going,” he takes in a rattling

breath. “When he came back, this last time, he said...said he was tired of letting everyone down. What if—“

“You’re kidding? That’s like the most Remus thing to say it doesn’t—you’re really fucking reaching with that one.”

But Sirius doesn’t let it go. “Moody just said, randomly admitting to feelings of guilt—“

“He always feels guilty!” James shouts, loud enough that the remaining Order members have started looking their way. Frustrated, he gets off the couch, turning towards the window, hands running through his hair. It’s a while before he’s able to face Sirius again.

“Why are you acting like this? Why are you acting like you don’t know who he is?”

Sirius has gone back to staring at the floor, jaw tense. “Maybe I don’t.”

For a moment James actually thinks about hitting him. “Don’t you dare say this shit to Moony, don’t you dare fucking drag him down with this. Jesus Christ Sirius.”

Sirius doesn’t say anything, the same expression on his face he used to wear when McGonagall was dressing him down—petulant, defiant, stubborn.

“You need to figure your shit out,” James says finally. “I’ve never met two people more incompetent at loving each other.”

He doesn’t mean it to sound the way it does. It’s supposed to be snarky not cruel. But he can physically see the words burn Sirius, his mouth flicking down before he gets to his feet.

“Cheers mate.”

He’s heading for the door before James even has the chance to blink.

“Fuck—Sirius!” James calls after him. But he doesn’t turn around and James doesn’t have the heart to follow. Doesn’t know if it would do any good. “Fuck,” he hisses again, kicking the sofa before collapsing back onto it. He brings his hands up, covering his face.

“I feel like that was my fault.”

James peers through his fingers at a repentant looking Peter and sighs. “Don’t beat yourself up about it, but yeah, it kinda was.”

Peter sits down next to him and James drops his hands into his lap, both boys lapsing into silence for a while.

“Do you ever think about before?” Peter finally says.

James looks at him wearily. “Before?”

“Before Hogwarts...before Sirius and Remus. When it was just us?”

Not really, is the answer. For starters, James's memories prior to the age of eleven are a little hazy, as he imagines most people's are. But also...everything before the Marauders feels flat somehow. James wasn't really himself before he had his boys.

"It was nice," Peter goes on when James doesn't answer. "Right?" His friend looks at him now, something a little—James doesn't even know—desperate? In his eyes. And James feels like he's missed something. Doesn't understand how they got from suspecting Remus to this.

"Sure Pete. Yeah. It was...nice." He claps him on the back and watches something in Peter's eyes flicker. That was the wrong thing to say. Or the wrong way to say it. Peter can see right through him.

"Pete—"

"I should get going," Peter says abruptly, pulling away from James and getting to his feet. He shoots him a self-deprecating smile. "See you, yeah?"

And before James can respond Peter is moving quickly out of the room. James watching him go.

Good job Potter, he thinks coldly. That's two people you've let down and it's not even noon yet. Must be a personal best.

It's only twenty minutes later that he's walking into his own house. The lights out. The rooms dark.

"Lily?" he tries, even though he already knows she isn't home. Silence answers him back and he doesn't know why it makes him angry. He has half a mind to firecall Sirius. Half a mind to just show up at his flat and hash this all out. Partially because he hates fighting with him and partially because he doesn't know what to do with the insidious energy thrumming under his skin.

It makes him antsy. He can't sit. Can't read. He needs to move. He should go flying, that usually helps, but his hands are shaking too much, in this state he'd crash into the side of the house.

He makes it up to the second floor, to his empty bedroom, sheets still messed up, and he starts pacing. Is this really how they're supposed to live from now on? Never knowing where anyone is or what they're doing or when they're coming back? He always felt Remus was in the wrong for keeping secrets, even if it was on Dumbledore's orders. It drives cracks into everything. Remus and Sirius never really fought at school, not after they got together properly. There were moments sure, but, for the most part...this fucking war. This fucking war is killing all of them. It's driving them all out of their heads. There's no way that Sirius can really believe, I mean really believe that Remus would betray them. Right? Right?? Because if they've gone that far—if they've lost each other that much...how will they ever come back from it? What the hell is going to happen to them?

“Fuck,” James snaps, knocking something off his dresser and feeling mildly satisfied when it slams into the wall. Not satisfied enough of course. He throws a real proper temper tantrum then, Sirius would be proud—knocking things over, kicking and punching and cursing like a little kid who hasn’t got his way. Like someone trapped in a life they have no control over, watching other people make decisions for them.

By the time he’s done his skin is hot and sweaty, his chest heaving, the tremor in his hands gone. His room is also a fucking disaster. There are spells for this, but he’d rather clean it up by hand. He took it all apart quickly but he puts it back together almost painfully slow. Delicate with his movements. Like an apology. Glasses and books returned to bedside tables, picture frames set upright again. When he heaves the dresser onto its feet some of the drawers slide out, contents spilling onto the floor.

They’re clothes mostly. Socks and jumpers that he hasn’t got the patience to re-fold so he just starts shoving them all back into roughly the same drawers and slamming them shut. Until his hand brushes against something hard. There, beneath one of his t-shirts, is a small wooden box. For a minute James just stares at it. It’s been a long time since he’s looked at it—shoved all the way at the back of his dresser. He’s not sure why he kept it, except that the idea of throwing it away makes him want to be sick.

Eventually he gives in, reaching for it as he collapses down onto the floor. He runs his fingers over it, brushing off the dust, before he flicks open the lid, revealing the little miniature ball inside, initials catching the light.

J&R

Sometimes, he can’t even believe any of it really happened. It doesn’t sound real. Doesn’t sound like him—getting with his best mates brother. A Slytherin. A Death Eater.

He stares the Quaffle down like it’ll give him the answers. Like it’ll tell him what happened and why all this time later it still feels...like this. He’d told his mother he didn’t want Regulus to become a bruise and he’d gotten his wish. Regulus isn’t a bruise. He’s a tsunami. And every time James lets himself think of him, lets himself remember, he’s overwhelmed. He loses sight of the shore. Forgets it even exists at all. He isn’t even here, hasn’t been, in a very long time, and yet somehow, Regulus still has the ability to wrap himself around James. To be all he can hear and feel and think. All he can breathe and smell and taste.

Which is exactly why he needs to stay at the back of James’s dresser.

He snaps the box shut, eyes falling on what had been lying next to it. Black velvet, a jewellery case his mother had very politely not asked him about when she saw him buying it. This he really doesn’t know why he kept. He sets the Quaffle down next to it, a matching set. He’d agonized about what to get Regulus, what could possibly match his gift. It couldn’t just be something he bought, it had to be something he made. The problem was, James’s magic has always been big and loud and strong, well suited to duelling not meticulous charm work. Still, he’d been determined.

He can’t help wondering what Regulus would have thought, if he’d had the time to give it to him. If everything hadn’t gone to hell after Christmas. If things had been different. It

shouldn't matter now. He wishes it didn't.

"James?" the front door closes and James jolts, like he's been caught.

He throws the two boxes back in his dresser, slamming the drawer shut and trying to ignore the sinking feeling of guilt currently eating its way through his stomach.

"Up here!" James calls down to Lily as he heads for the bedroom door. Looking over his shoulder like he's expecting to see Regulus standing there. Like Lily could walk in on them. Catch him with the memory of the boy he used to love.

Still loves. When he lets himself. When he forgets about the shore.

PART II REGULUS

Personally, Regulus thinks Malfoy Manor is a little tacky. But maybe he's biased. It's all marble floors and pillars, all thirty-foot ceilings and chandeliers, and gilded mirrors. Where Grimmauld is gothic and cluttered, Malfoy Manor is open and Grecian. There are peacocks in the front yard.

Like he said. Tacky.

They all sit in the drawing room at a long wooden table (Regulus is frankly surprised it isn't made out of marble too) listening to Snape and Lucius bicker. The Dark Lord isn't there of course, or things would likely be proceeding with more decorum. As it is, they are forced to watch two little men haggling over the scraps of power that have been left for them.

Regulus is sunk low in his chair, arms crossed over his chest, fighting the heaviness in his eyes. He expects all of this would be rather more annoying if he weren't blitzed out of his mind. The potions leave him sated. Content. Here or at Grimmauld place it doesn't matter. He feels the same.

Well, until Snape chucks an inkwell at his head. Luckily Evan swats it away because there is no chance Regulus's reflexes are fast enough to dodge anything right now.

"Fuck off Severus," Evan snaps, as the glass bottle clatters to the ground.

"You know," Regulus sits up straight, "if you needed something you could have just asked," he notices a few uncomfortable looks being passed around the table and instantly understands his mistake. Snape had asked, Regulus was just too high to notice.

"He speaks," Snape sneers. "It's a fucking miracle."

"Well maybe if you and Lucius said anything worth listening to I wouldn't be falling asleep." A few people chuckle.

"I'm sorry," Snape says, dark eyes narrowing, "are we boring you? I know you may not be aware of this little prince, but taking over a government is actually quite a bit of work."

He's always hated that. Little Prince. Not just because it's patronizing, but because it's what they used to call Sirius. Except back then it sounded like they meant it.

"And how much of that work have you accomplished exactly?" Regulus snaps back.

"Because from where I'm sitting all you've been discussing for the past hour is whose dick is bigger."

There's laughter again, Evan actually sounds like he's choking, "Fuck Reg," he mutters under his breath, the heat rising in Severus's face.

"I expect," Snape's tinny voice cuts through the noise, "if we were talking about dicks we'd have more of your attention."

The mood in the room shifts instantly. There's no laughter. This is not a crowd that takes kindly to such accusations. Regulus wonders if Snape even fully understands that, having not grown up in this world, with these families and their mansions and their precious baby boys. If he ever understood what he was threatening Regulus with, even back in school.

"The fuck did you just say?" Evan demands, but Regulus holds up his hand. He doesn't need anyone to fight his battles for him, especially not against Snape. Not anymore.

"Tell me Severus, how is Lily Evans doing these days?" If his last remark filled Snape's face with colour, this one drains it of it.

"Alright, okay, enough boys," Lucius finally steps back in. "We're all friends here yes?"

Evan snorts but neither Regulus nor Snape contradict him, instead they settle for glaring viciously at one another across the table.

"Excellent," Lucius goes on, clearly enjoying himself. "Now Regulus, we were wondering if you thought it was possible to make a version of a sleeping potion that was gaseous."

Regulus blinks, momentarily distracted from his staring contest with Snape. "Gaseous?" he repeats. He's never changed the state of a potion before and the challenge peaks his interest.

"Yes, so that people will be able to feel the effects through inhalation rather than ingestion. Severus wasn't sure if it could be done."

And oh.

Oh isn't that just delightful.

He turns his gaze back on Snape who is practically vibrating with anger, a smirk curving the corner of Regulus's mouth. "Severus wasn't sure?" he repeats, gloating.

I mean, he isn't sure either. He's never done it. Never even thought about it. But nobody here knows that. Without taking his eyes off Snape he answers.

"Yeah, I expect it can be done."

There is the faint murmur of skepticism along the table but Regulus doesn't pay it much mind, enjoying Snape's scowling face far too much.

"We'll need it to be ready within the next few days, so we have time to test it out before we make our move on the Ministry. Do you think you can manage that?"

"Yes," another lie. Or, well, half-lie, at least. He has no idea how long it'll take.

"Well then, look at that," Lucius claps a hand on Snape's shoulder that only exaggerates the other boy's awkwardness. "I told you he would know what to do."

Snape's eyes are mutinous, Regulus is surprised he isn't barring his teeth. "A shame he couldn't stay conscious long enough to tell us earlier. Save us all this back and forth."

"Being a sore loser isn't very becoming Severus," Regulus says dryly, not that any part of Snape is becoming. Next to him Evan snorts.

"No one is perfect," Lucius says, dismissing them both with the wave of his hand before looking down at the notes in front of him. "So you two will have that done by Sunday, yes?"

Regulus very nearly bangs his head on the table in front of him.

"The two of us?" Snape hisses, lanky black hair falling in his face.

"Well you are our best potioners and we need this done quickly. So yes. The two of you."

No really, Regulus thinks it would help, just slamming his forehead into something hard. Maybe if he gets a concussion they'll take pity on him and won't make him work with Snape.

"The Dark Lord values cooperation," Lucius's eyes flick up off the page in front of him and pass between Regulus and Snape. "You wouldn't want me to tell him you two are being uncooperative now would you?"

Regulus struggles not to roll his eyes. He hates it when Lucius tries to play father. He's been doing it more and more since they found out Narcissa is pregnant.

"No," Regulus says finally, when the silence stretches on too long. "That won't be necessary, we can work together."

Snape looks like he's just swallowed something rotten but when Lucius turns to him he forces himself to speak. "We'll work together."

"Come to Grimmauld tomorrow, we can start then," Regulus says.

"Why do we have to work at your house?"

This time Regulus really does roll his eyes. "Do you have a fully functioning potions lab in your flat?" he demands, the silence he is met with is all the answer he needs. "Yeah, that's what I thought. So we'll meet at mine."

Snape looks like he's about to say something bratty back but Lucius quickly cuts him off. "Brilliant plan, I knew they didn't call you a genius for no reason Regulus," he gives him a wink that Regulus absolutely does not appreciate. "Now, on to other business..."

Whatever that other business is Regulus hardly pays attention, although he knows he should. Instead, he spends the remainder of the meeting trying to figure out if there is any plausible way he could poison Snape and make it look like an accident.

"Are you feeling alright?"

Regulus starts. He's been staring at the sink in the Malfoy's kitchen for a long time. Too long. He isn't even sure what he got distracted by. He came in here for a glass of water and somehow ended up...drifting.

The voice behind him is enough to wake him up though. Enough to make his hackles rise.

"You suddenly care how I'm feeling Lucius?" his back is to him, hands pressed to the counter.

"I've always cared about you," he answers smoothly, making every inch of Regulus feel grimy and gross and unbearable.

"Have you," he asks biting. "And how exactly were you caring for me when you started trying to convince the Dark Lord of my wavering loyalty?"

"Oh that."

Regulus laughs humourlessly. "Yeah that."

"Well I felt perhaps your head was getting a bit too big, that you could do with being knocked down a few pegs. I knew the Dark Lord would be merciful," Lucius walks forward, his hand wrapping around the back of Regulus's neck, making every muscle in his body stiffen. "After all, you're his little prince."

Regulus looks up at the window across from them, looks at their reflections in the glass, Lucius a few inches taller, looming over him. Regulus looks young. He looks thirteen. Nothing has changed. Nothing ever changes.

"Tell me," Lucius's voice is low, intimate, making Regulus want to dismantle himself. Break down his body into parts and rebuild himself somewhere else. Rebuild himself without this skin that has been so thoroughly misused. "Tell me what's wrong?"

He's so afraid. Even all this time later the fear is a live wire in his chest that makes moving and fighting hard.

"Let go of me," he manages through gritted teeth.

“Oh Regulus,” Lucius sounds amused. “You can’t push away everyone who loves you.”

He wants to say that no one ever has loved him, but that’s not quite true. He wants to say that if someone ever did he would never let them go. That he would leave claw marks in their skin. But then that’s not quite true either.

He knows this twisted thing with Lucius isn’t love. He knows that after James in a way he never could have before him. In a way he didn’t when he was thirteen.

Someone clears their throat and Lucius’s hand instantly falls away, though he’s slow to step back, unhurried.

“Severus,” he greets calmly, and Regulus squeezes his eyes shut, still frozen in front of the sink.

“I just came to get some water,” Snape says stiffly. “Am I interrupting?”

Regulus wants to curl in on himself. Wants to run from the room. Wants to scream.

He doesn’t do any of that of course. Just keeps standing there, back to the room.

“By all means,” he hears Lucius say, hears his footsteps on the fucking marble floor as he starts to walk away. “We’ll chat later Regulus,” he throws casually over his shoulder.

Joy.

Regulus still can’t really move, luckily the kitchen sink, like every other damned part of this house, is grande and excessive, so there’s more than enough room for Snape to get to the tap. Regulus forces his eyes open again but stares intently straight ahead and not at the boy next to him.

“Well doesn’t this feel familiar,” Snape says as he fills his glass.

Regulus grits his teeth and ignores him, attempting to pull himself back together, wishing he wasn’t so easily shaken. He feels Snape pause beside him, and when the pause drags on too long he forces himself to look up. It’s surprising, when he finds something like concern in Snape’s expression. Concern and confusion.

“Black are you—“

“I’m fine,” the shock of Snape considering his well being for even a second is enough to jolt Regulus into action again. He pulls away from the counter, hands in fists as he does his best to walk normally. The meeting is over and he just wants to leave, to go back to the quiet safety of his house. To take something that’ll make his memories stop shaking.

“Oi, there you are,” Evan smiles, him and Barty pulling away from the wall just outside of the drawing room and coming towards him.

“I thought you two had left,” Regulus says wearily. He hasn’t got the emotional energy to socialize right now. And he hates being in this fucking house.

“Nah, just listening to Barty bitch about how he’s being benched again.”

The boy in question crosses his arms over his chest and, there’s no other word for it, pouts. “I can’t fucking believe it.”

“I mean, it is the place where you work. If you lose your mask there during the fighting then poof,” Evan makes a sort of farting noise to emphasize his point. “Cover blown.”

“But what does it matter if we’re gonna take over the Ministry anyway!”

Evan shrugs. “Suppose they wanna be careful, incase we don’t manage it.”

Regulus feels barely present, like there’s a wall between him and everything around him. He needs to leave.

“—if Macdonald’s there you better make sure no one gets her,” Barty is rambling on. “That bitch is mine.”

“Honestly Barty, I think this little crush of your’s is getting a bit out of hand.”

“Don’t be disgusting Evan.”

“I mean, I would get it if you were like, dying to shag her or whatever, but it’s not as though you haven’t already had a go on—“

“Shut up.”

The word is sharp and loud when it comes out of Regulus’s mouth, instantly silencing Evan. For a moment his friends just stare back at him and Regulus struggles to hold onto reality. A million thoughts and feelings colliding in his head, making everything unclear.

“Shut up,” he repeats, even though no one is talking.

“Reg are you—“

“That never happened.”

He remembers it and he doesn’t all at the same time. The room. The people. Closed bed curtains. Blood. He remembers it and he doesn’t. Because sometimes when he thinks about it the room looks different. Sometimes the people change. Sometimes Lucius is there. And sometimes he isn’t.

Regulus is too sensitive and too numb. Too high and too sober. All kinds of wrong bubbling inside his skin.

“I stopped it,” he feels shaky. “I got there and I stopped it. Nothing happened in that room.”

Nothing happened in any room.

In any bed.

Nothing happened.

Or if it did...it didn't matter.

Evan is looking at him perhaps with the most genuine concern Regulus has ever seen on his face, but Barty just snorts.

“Yeah, because before you got there we were all sitting around having tea—oof.”

Evan has thrown his arm into Barty's stomach like he's trying to stop him from running off a cliff. He does it with enough force that the other boy actually doubles over.

“Fuck you!” he wheezes, but Evan hasn't taken his eyes off of Regulus. Studying him, like he's looking for answers. Everything around Regulus blurs in and out of focus. Panic attack, his mind supplies. It isn't a very helpful observation.

“Nothing happened in that room,” Evan says slowly, like he's talking to a scared little kid. “That's—yeah. That's right. Isn't it Barty?”

Barty, who is still gripping his knees, glares up at both of them. “What the hell are you—“ this time he cuts himself off, clearly seeing something threatening in Evan's expression. Rolling his eyes he straightens up. “Fine, fuck, nothing happened,” and then, looking directly at Regulus, “you're fucking mental sometimes, I swear to god.”

“Christ Barty.”

But Regulus doesn't care, he's already walking away. He can't be here anymore. He can't think anymore. Memories and feelings scraping the walls of his skull. Lies and realities all blending together.

“Regulus!”

He floos into his living room, stumbling a little bit as the portraits of his ancestors stare down with disapproval at the quivering mess their line has become. Sirius would never be this pathetic. A blood traitor maybe, but at least he wasn't weak.

“Master Regulus?” Kreacher calls out. Regulus thinks he's in the kitchen, but he doesn't stop long enough to find out, taking the stairs two at a time and barely making it to the bathroom before throwing up. He grips the toilet and tries to breathe.

Inhale.

Exhale.

Funny how it never gets better, no matter how many times it happens.

Inhale.

Exhale

Funny how the fear never dulls. Always insisting this will be the time he won't be able to catch his breath. This will be the time he lets his thoughts drown him.

Inhale.

Exhale.

He can still feel Lucius's hand on the back of his neck.

Still feel Mary Macdonald's blood.

Inhale.

Exhale.

He has to hold onto the sink in order to stand up, hands shaking as they reach for the bottles lined up neatly behind the mirror. He pulls the stopper out of the first one with his teeth, downing the contents in a single go before reaching for the next. He gets through about two and a half before things really start to get woozy, but he is feeling better. His heart rate slowing, his thoughts going from a sprint, to a walk, to a crawl. Everything becomes softer. Hazier. Easier to manage.

He kind of forgets about himself after that.

"Master Regulus? Master Regulus you is be needing to be up now sir. You is having company now sir!"

Regulus groans, throwing a pillow over his head and trying to drown out the croaky voice nagging at him. It sounds like a frog, though he doesn't know why a frog would be bugging him to get out of bed.

He's still pondering this thought when his pillow is mercilessly ripped away from him and used to smack him in the face.

"Master. Regulus. Must. Get. Up. Now," each word punctuated with a hit. "Mr. Snape is waiting and he is getting very impatient. Kreacher is certain he will soon be coming up here to demand an audience and Kreacher does not think Master Regulus will like him to be seeing him like this."

"Argh," Regulus manages eloquently, grabbing hold of the pillow and wrestling it out of the house elf's hands. However, to Kreacher's credit, Regulus is now awake.

He glares at the elf who is standing on the edge of the mattress huffing and puffing and looking thoroughly unimpressed. Regulus hugs the pillow to his chest with one arm and scrubs at his face with the other.

"What are you blabbering on about," realizing with disgust that he fell asleep in yesterday's clothes. And without brushing his teeth. He makes a revolted face at the stale, dry taste in his

mouth.

“Mr. Snape has been waiting downstairs for Master Regulus for almost thirty whole minutes and he is being very angry sir.”

Regulus blinks at him. “Snape? Severus Snape? Is here?”

“Yes Sir.”

“What time is it?”

“Noon sir.”

A cold sense of dread washes over him. “No. Oh fuck. I’m supposed to start working on this fucking potion with Snape this morning,” he mutters as he scrambles out of bed. Looking down at himself and grimacing. He can’t meet Snape wearing yesterday’s clothes.

“Yes I is knowing this sir.”

“Then why the hell didn’t you wake me earlier!” Regulus snaps.

It’s now Kreacher’s turn to glare. “I have been trying sir,” he gestures emphatically at the bed and Regulus groans, covering his face with his hands. He has a pounding headache and despite having slept like the dead he feels fucking exhausted.

“Sorry Kreacher,” he says finally “I’m just—I’m not used to oversleeping.”

And now Kreacher looks worried instead of annoyed, which is definitely worse. “I is knowing this too sir.”

“Will you just—tell Snape I’ll be down in ten minutes alright?”

Kreacher grimaces. “I will try,” and with a crack he disappears, leaving Regulus alone with his self-hatred.

This truly is a new low. Regulus is always prepared, always on time, being caught like this—it makes him feel weak. He taps his fingers anxiously on his thigh, closing his eyes for a minute and breathing in deeply. He doesn’t have time to be upset with himself right now. He has to get it together.

He counts to ten before opening his eyes again. And then he forces himself to move.

He showers and dresses in record time, and when he finally makes it down the stairs to the sitting room it’s only been five minutes longer than he promised. Though he can hear Snape bitching from the hallway.

“—and if he thinks that I’ll just wait around here all day while he—“

“Stop harassing my house elf Severus,” he says lazily from the doorway, hands in his trouser pockets, shoulders pulled back. Both of the individuals in the room turn towards him,

Kreacher looking significantly more happy to see him than Snape.

“You’re late,” Snape snaps, eyes already narrowed.

“Yup,” is all Regulus says before he turns his attention to Kreacher. “Can you get lunch ready for us? I’m starving.” Which isn’t exactly true but he knows it will make Kreacher happy to hear. Honestly, Regulus’s stomach feels like a bit of a toxic wasteland at the moment.

“Yes sir, of course,” Kreacher bows his head. “I will be making it at once.” With another crack he very happily gets himself out of Snape’s sight.

Regulus feels the other boy run him over. “You look like shit Black.”

“Right back at you sweetheart,” though he does look like shit. Half because he’s hungover and half because he hasn’t taken anything this morning. There’s an insistent itch under his skin begging for potions but he pushes it aside. He needs his thoughts clear for this. And he doesn’t like the idea of being alone around Snape without his senses.

“Well c’mon then, lets get this over with,” Regulus turns around and heads towards the basement stairs. Snape’s grumpy footsteps following after him.

When they enter the lab he summons a sleep potion to the work table in the middle of the room, along with all the individual ingredients, laying them out in neat piles. And then. Without thinking. He flicks his wand again.

“Fuck,” Snape stumbles into the table as a ghostly stag comes galloping into the room.

It’s been weeks since Regulus has been able to conjure Boo, but he’s spent so long doing it that it’s become second nature. Even when he’s high he still tries to cast his Patronus, still watches as nothing but white vapours come out of his wand. Now he stands face to face with the stag and he feels his heart tremble ever so slightly.

Hi, he almost says. Hey. Hello.

I’ve missed you.

“Your Patronus is a stag?” Snape demands, sounding unnecessarily upset as he rights himself.

Regulus blinks, pulling his eyes away from the animal in front of him to meet Snape’s angry glare.

“Obviously,” he says, even though it hadn’t been remotely obvious to him the first time.

Snape just keeps scrutinizing him, but to be quite frank, Regulus can’t be bothered figuring out why. He turns to Boo, who steps forward, gently knocking his forehead against Regulus’s shoulder before he saunters off, walking the perimeter of the room as he is wont to do. It feels good, having him here. Calms some of the jittering in Regulus’s skin.

“You expecting dementors?” Snape asks, still eyeing Regulus with suspicion.

Regulus shrugs. "Never know these days."

And surprisingly, Snape seems to accept this.

"So," Regulus faces the table. "I suppose the real question, is do you think we'll have to brew the ingredients differently, to make them react to oxygen and become gaseous, or do we have to find a way to transfigure the finished solution?"

He expects some kind of snappy remark but instead Snape seems to be seriously considering the question, stepping up beside him in front of the table. After several long minutes of gazing intently at the ingredients, Snape speaks;

"We'll have to change how it's brewed," there is something definite about his tone. "Transfiguration will alter the appearance but it won't change the actual properties of the mixture. It would still have to be drunk."

Regulus nods. "I agree. We should specifically focus on how we brew—"

"The Lavender and Valerian Sprigs."

"Yes, exactly. If we smoke the Valerian—"

"And boil the Lavender—"

"That might do the trick."

"That makes sense. Altering those two ingredients should alter the state of the potion itself. I can take the Lavender if you want to—"

"Smoke the Valerian, sure. I'm also thinking we should increase the length of time it simmers for."

Snape nods. "Yes, that's a good idea."

"Good."

"Good."

They both look at each other, suddenly realizing that, not only have they just had a whole conversation without insulting or threatening one another, but they have, in fact, been finishing one another's sentences.

Eventually Snape coughs, clearing his throat. "We should...get started."

"Yeah. Yes. Definitely."

It's awkward sure, though not as awkward as it should be. Both of them far too engrossed in their work to really think about how much they dislike the person next to them. When all is said and done the stakes are too high for personal grudges. This is a very complicated

bastardization of potion law that they've promised they'll be able to achieve in a very short amount of time. And if there is one person you keep your promises to, it's the Dark Lord.

"That's it then," Regulus says as he wipes the sweat from his forehead, stepping back and watching the cauldron in front of him boil.

"That's it," Snape agrees.

"Now we wait."

"Now we wait."

Regulus lets the awkward silence linger for a moment longer before he starts tidying up the mess they've made. They're starting with a single batch, and if that turns out as planned they'll figure out how to mass produce the stuff. It's a delicate science, potions, making large quantities of something requires more thought than simply doubling the recipe.

"How do you know Lucius?"

The question comes so out of nowhere that Regulus actually drops the mortar and pestle he's holding. The tools banging onto the tabletop.

"He's married to my cousin," Regulus chokes out, heart stuttering as he quickly cleans up his mess. He has his back to Snape so he can't see his face.

"Did you know him before that?"

"Sure," Regulus sweeps up the left over ingredients, placing them in their individual jars. He could do it with his wand but he's grateful to have something to keep his hands occupied. There's another long moment of silence and Regulus is hopeful that this weird line of questioning has reached it's conclusion but then Snape speaks again:

"Is there something going on between you two?"

Regulus has to pause before he grabs the next jar, hands shaking too badly. "No."

"Sorry, I should have phrased that differently. Clearly something is going on between you two."

Regulus gives up on the ingredients and resorts to simply gripping the wooden table. "No."

"Just like there was nothing going on between you and Roger Flint?"

"Fuck you."

"Or James Potter?"

The comparison rocks Regulus, vomit crawling up the back of his throat. He's been throwing up far too much lately for someone who's barely eating.

There's a pause, and when Snape speaks again his voice has changed, like he's making a conscious effort to take the antagonism out of his words. "I thought I understood what it was... And then I saw your face yesterday, in the kitchen... I've seen that expression before."

Regulus flinches, embarrassed, but he doesn't think Snape notices.

"My father..."

His voice trails off, leaving those words hanging in the air, letting them grow big. It takes Regulus a minute to realize that this isn't supposed to be an attack. He had just assumed Snape was going to use Lucius against him the way he has always used everything else. And yet... there is something in that broken sentence that suggests otherwise.

"My father hates magic," it sounds like the words are difficult, like each one is being pulled unwillingly from his mouth.

Regulus blinks, surprised by the sudden shift in the conversation. Slowly he loosens his grip on the table so that he can turn around. Snape is standing awkwardly in the middle of the room, though to be honest he rarely looks anything but awkward, a scowl still on his face, though the displeasure doesn't quite reach his eyes this time.

"I thought your father was a wizard?" Regulus says finally, trying to let some of the tension in his body go.

Snape snorts. "Only technically," he looks like he has more to say so Regulus waits, and eventually; "He takes it out on her, my mum. When I was a kid I used to think they were just fighting, that it was both of them you know? But... the older I got the more I realized that she wasn't fighting back. I'd walk into the room afterwards and she'd be wearing that same expression you were yesterday and I just... I knew something wasn't right."

They're both silent for a long time after that. Neither of them seeming to know what to do. Everything feeling just a little too vulnerable. A little too close to the bone.

"I can handle Lucius," Regulus says finally, because someone has to say something and it's the best he can manage at the moment.

A humourless smile ghosts across Snape's mouth. "Yeah, that's what she always says too. I tried to get her to leave, after I finished school, when I could help her. But..."

Before Regulus can think better of it the words are out of his mouth; "You sound like my brother."

Snape's expression instantly shutters. "I am nothing like your brother," the hatred in his words is so visceral Regulus swears he can feel it. Sharp and violent and festering. But he only shrugs. "Suit yourself."

It's relatively quiet after that, until the potion is done. They cork it and then look at the vial, seemingly at a loss for what to do next.

“I could test it on you?” Regulus offers sweetly, batting his lashes.

“The fuck you will,” Snape says. “How about I test it on you?”

Regulus sighs, leaning forward on the table in front of him, inspecting the vial in his hands. If all has gone well, the next time this solution is exposed to oxygen it will change states and render anyone who inhales it senseless. Asleep. Something sharp cuts through his stomach at the thought of how dangerous that actually is. About who’s going to wield that power.

There’s a crack and Regulus looks up to see Kreacher standing in the middle of the room.

“Master Regulus, lunch is being ready sir, where shall I be serving it? In the dining room or...down here?” it is clear from the look on the house elf’s face, as he surveys the lab, which of those two locations he deems more suitable.

Regulus opens his mouth to respond when Snape beats him to it.

“Lets use him.”

Regulus looks over his shoulder. “Use him?” he repeats dumbly.

Snape nods at Kreacher. “Lets test the potion out on him.”

“What?” Regulus demands. “No. We’re not—no. I’m not doing that. What the hell is wrong with you?”

Snape rolls his eyes. “Isn’t that what they’re for?”

Regulus is starting to get genuinely angry, and Boo can clearly sense it, pawing at the ground with his hoof, like he’s getting ready to charge.

“No, it’s not. Also he has a fucking name.”

Snape rolls his eyes again. “You’re being ridiculous.”

“I’m being ridiculous!” Regulus says outraged. “You’re the one suggesting we use my house elf as a lab rat.”

“I’ve seen house elves used for worse.”

“Well not by me.”

“Like I said, ridiculous.”

“Okay, you know what—“ Regulus takes a step towards Snape, not entirely sure what he’s planning to do, but then Kreacher’s voice pulls him back.

“Is there being something I can do for the young Masters?”

“No,” Regulus says, at the same moment that Snape says; “Yes.”

The house elf's big eyes bounce between the pair of them.

"Look," Snape steps forward, now speaking to Kreacher directly "we have this potion and we need to know if it works—"

"Shut up Snape."

"—so we need to test it out on you—"

"Shut up!"

"—is that alright?"

And of course, Kreacher says what Regulus knew he would. What he has to say, to every request his Masters make of him. That any wizards make of him. Regulus has always hated it, hated it more when his mother was here. He tries not to ask too much of Kreacher, though he knows he doesn't always manage it. Knows that these days he's been using him as a stand in parent. But it's never seemed right to him. Asking things of a person who can't say no.

"It would be an honour," Kreacher says, puffing out his chest a little.

Snape gives Regulus a look like "there, you see?" and it makes Regulus want to punch his stupid face.

He turns to the house elf himself now. "Kreacher, you don't have to do this, honestly."

But Kreacher only shakes his head. "I would be liking to help Master Regulus and his friend," Regulus barely holds back a scoff. Whatever him and Snape are, it certainly isn't friends.

"Great," Snape says, drawing out his wand. "If we use Bubble-head charms it ought to protect us from breathing in the gas ourselves."

"Wait, wait," Regulus holds out his hands, "we don't even have an antidote."

Snape gives him a long, unimpressed look. "You don't have an antidote for a Sleeping Draught?"

Regulus grits his teeth. "We don't know if that'll work with this new iteration of the potion."

"Yes," Snape says slowly, like he's talking to an idiot, "figuring that sort of thing out is exactly why we need to test it."

They glare at one another for a moment, Regulus wishing desperately that he had some sort of comeback.

"Like I said," Snape goes on eventually, an infuriating smugness in his voice. "If you're uncomfortable using the elf, I am more than happy to test it out on you."

There is no way in hell Regulus is allowing himself to be rendered effectively unconscious in the presence of Severus Snape. Scowling, he turns back to Kreacher.

“We’re just going to put you to sleep for a minute or two okay—“

“Well, really we ought to see how long it lasts, one would hope at least an hour.”

Regulus grits his teeth but ignores the other boy. “Is that alright with you?”

Kreacher nods enthusiastically. “I is always wanting only to serve the house of Black. I is very happy to be of help to Master Regulus.”

“Adorable,” Snape says flatly in the background and Regulus feels his hands curl into fists.

“Okay,” he exhales. “Okay, so when I unstopper the potion you won’t have to drink it, you’ll just have to breathe it in, you understand?”

Another nod.

Regulus pulls out his own wand, casting the Bubble-head charm on himself and hearing Snape, behind him, doing the same. Kreacher waits, staring at him expectantly. Regulus hates this. Because it feels like taking advantage, but he can’t really see any other options so reluctantly he pulls the cork from the bottle.

Nothing happens.

Fuck.

What did they do wrong? Should they try smoking both the Lavender and the Valerian sprigs? Is that it? If they don’t figure this out—

But then, before his eyes, the potion begins to evaporate out of the vial, disappearing into the air.

“I is not feeling any—“ Kreacher starts, before his face goes slack. Regulus barely has enough time to drop the glass vial and step forward before Kreacher is falling to the floor. He catches him just in time, cushioning his head as he lowers him carefully to the ground.

Regulus finds himself grateful at least, that this is the potion they needed to test. Kreacher looks peaceful. It could have been so much worse. He feels Snape coming to stand behind him.

“Excellent,” he says, though he doesn’t sound particularly enthused. He doesn’t really sound like anything. “I’ll write Lucius.”

It’s two days later that Regulus finds himself back at Malfoy Manor. He expects Snape to be there, they’ve been tinkering with the potion for the last few days. The effects seems to last for almost three hours, not as strong as it is when it’s consumed orally but more than good

enough for what they need it for. And brewing in mass batches hasn't produced any noticeable decrease in effectiveness, at least not so far.

Regulus assumes that's why he's here—to discuss the potion. But the longer the house elf leaves him standing alone in the insufferably grandiose lobby without any sign of Snape, the more nervous he starts to get. The owl he received had been vague, just stating that his presence was required at the Manner, final details for the coup in need of ironing out. It had been Lucius's handwriting. Regulus hadn't thought much about it. But maybe he should have.

He shuffles his feet, accidentally catching sight of himself in the nearly wall sized mirror beside him. It's frame is made of woven gold strands, flowers and cherubs holding up the corners. He doesn't quite...recognize himself. He's lost weight, which shouldn't be surprising but he just hadn't noticed, the bags under his eyes looking like bruises—blue and purple. His hair has grown long, the curls hanging in his face, brushing his shoulders. It's messier than he usually has it.

He's always liked his hair, especially when he was younger, because he'd thought it looked like Sirius's. It wasn't until his second year at Hogwarts that he started straightening and styling it. Trying to stop people from making those comparisons he had once craved so desperately.

I'm nothing like your brother.

That's what Snape had said.

No, Regulus thinks, staring wistfully at his reflection. No, me either.

“Sorry for the wait,” Lucius comes strutting down the hall, heeled boots making that distinctive clinking noise that Regulus has to force himself not to flinch at. “Business, you know how it is.”

Regulus really doesn't.

“You going somewhere?” Regulus asks, eyeing Lucius's travel cloak.

“We are going somewhere,” the older man corrects, holding out his arm. After a few seconds Regulus realizes that Lucius wants him to side-along.

“Going where?” he demands, not moving an inch. There's no way in hell he's going anywhere with Lucius.

“To meet some new friends, they'll be joining us at the Ministry. We need to give them the run down of what's going to happen.”

“Why me?” Regulus asks skeptically.

Lucius “tuts” wagging his arm at Regulus who still doesn't move. Eventually Lucius rolls his eyes. “Well Severus has been sent to perform another task for the Dark Lord—“

“What task?” Regulus asks so quickly it makes Lucius laugh.

“Jealous?” and when Regulus refuses to respond he goes on. “Don’t worry, it’s far less fun than what we’re about to do. Now come on.”

“Tell me where we’re going Lucius and I’ll Apparate there myself.”

“You’re being childish.”

Once again Regulus stonewalls him. Staring blankly back, silent and unwavering. It’s a trick he learned from his mother.

Lucius huffs. “Merlin, alright, alright. 88 Clements Avenue, London.” And with that Lucius swirls out of existence, leaving Regulus with more questions than answers.

“Clements,” he mutters to himself, running over the address a dozen times. He’s almost positive he’s never heard of the street before, meaning it’s likely a Muggle populated area. He wracks his brain for who the hell they could be meeting in Muggle London but he comes up blank.

Honestly he should just go home, Lucius has left, there’s no one to stop him. And yet... damnit if he isn’t just a little bit curious. In all his notes and newspaper clippings he hasn’t heard anything about a Clements Avenue. And the relentless part of his brain is latching onto that gap in his knowledge. Wanting it to be filled.

“Fuck,” he hisses under his breath.

A moment later his shoes are slamming into the pavement on a rundown residential street somewhere in London.

“Certainly took your time,” Lucius drawls, from where he’s leaning against someone’s front gate.

It’s dark out today, cold. The trees are losing their leaves, and everything seems to be some shade of grey or brown here. Regulus wraps his arms around himself and tries to remember the last time he actually stepped foot outside.

“What the hell are we doing here Lucius?”

There’s something distinctly shark like about the older man’s mouth. “Told you, we’re meeting our friend’s.” He gestures to the dull brick house in front of them that blurs into the one next to it. They are surrounded on both sides by borderless houses. Bleeding into each other so that the street just becomes walls of brick. There’s very little green. The houses here don’t have lawns, just overgrown weeds poking through the cracked concrete.

He follows Lucius down the small walkway to a white screen door that Lucius unceremoniously throws open. Not even bothering to knock. Inside it’s a little dark and a little cramped and a little warm. The walls are clean but barren of photos or art or posters. There’s a table in the front room covered in paper—in scribbled notes and maps—two men standing over it, one smoking, neither of them looking up as Lucius and Regulus walk by.

Regulus can hear footsteps on the floors above them and voices coming from the room in front. The further in they get the more he starts to understand that this is not a house. Not a home where people live. It's headquarters.

They come into a kitchen with what used to be pink wallpaper that has now faded to a murky white. Like the sitting room, there are papers and maps everywhere. Supplies piled in the sink and on top of the stove, takeaway containers stacked up high in the corner. All giving the impression that this is a space rarely actually used for cooking.

At the table in the middle of the room there is a group of people having a conversation, coffee cups clutched in their hands. When Regulus sees them he suddenly realizes that that's the smell that seems to permeate the whole house. Coffee. At the centre of the conversation is a larger, gruff man that Regulus has seen before.

Fenrir Greyback.

Werewolves.

Regulus suddenly starts taking stock of the people he's seen, the noises. This house is full but the last time he checked Greyback had barely a dozen followers. A somewhat unappealing ally for the Dark Lord. It's clear things have changed.

Lucius stops in front of the table and clears his throat. He looks fundamentally out of place with his fussy appearance and expensive robes. It isn't that anyone here is dressed in rags, but it's a lot more sweatshirts and ripped jeans than silk and velvet.

Greyback looks up, smiling, and Regulus has to work to keep his expression neutral at the sight of his teeth. "Ah, Malfoy, good to see you. Was worried you got lost there for a moment."

"Yes, I do apologize for the wait," though he doesn't even remotely sound like he means it. "Things came up, you understand?"

"Sure," Greyback is still smiling, though it's clear from his eyes that he has not missed the dismissive tone of Lucius's words. "Well then, shall we talk? Perhaps somewhere a bit more...quiet?" Lucius asks, looking the kitchen over with open dislike. Regulus does not think this seems like a particularly smart way to handle this interaction but he's not about to step in. Quite frankly, he would pay good money to watch Greyback take a bite out of Lucius.

"Sure," Greyback responds again, this time rising out of his seat and towering over both of them. Regulus is quite frankly surprised his head doesn't brush the ceiling. "We'll talk upstairs. Luce," he looks at one of the women still sitting down. "Go get the kid will you?"

The woman nods, apparently in no doubt about who "the kid" is. She slips past Lucius and Regulus on her way out of the room, causing Lucius to arch his brow.

"The kid?"

Greyback is grinning again. “You have your prince,” he gestures to Regulus. “And I have mine.”

Regulus really needs to do something about that stupid fucking nickname.

He expects Lucius to argue, insist no one be in the room with them, it’s not as though he’s seemed to care much about offending Greyback so far. But he doesn’t, instead they follow quietly behind the large man as he leads them to the second floor.

They pass a ton of people—on the stairs, in the halls, the rooms they walk by—and Regulus is hit once again with the curiosity of where they all came from. And how they haven’t been arrested. Though he suspects that Lucius likely has something to do with that.

“After you,” Greyback says dryly as he gestures them into a small empty room. Not just empty of people, of course, but empty of anything except a few lonely wooden chairs and a tacked up map of the London underground. Regulus finds himself momentarily distracted by it. He has never been on the Muggle underground before, but the idea of a train that runs underground appeals to him, if for no other reason than the engineering. The problem solving. How did they manage it without magic, he wonders. What stops the earth from caving in?

“We’re waiting for your friend I take it?” Lucius says, as Greyback sits himself gracelessly in one of the wooden chair. It creaks under his weight.

“We are.”

Lucius does not sit. Nor does he lean. Regulus gets the distinct impression he is doing his very best not to touch anything.

They don’t have to wait long, it’s only another five minutes before Regulus hears the door opening, his attention once again caught by the map on the wall.

“Funny,” Greyback says. “I only remember asking for one insufferable know it all.”

“Yeah well, you’re getting two. Congratulations.”

Regulus turns around, blinking at the two boys who’ve just entered the room. It takes him a minute. Not because he doesn’t recognize him but because the idea that he’s standing here in this room is so absurd that his brain simply refuses to except it. And when reality continues to persist and the face in front of him doesn’t change, he feels himself start to laugh.

“Regulus?” Lucius asks, sounding genuinely startled.

But he just. He can’t. He looks around, wondering if anyone else will get the joke but he’s only met with slightly alarmed faces. For the first and only time in his life, Regulus finds himself wishing that Severus Snape was there.

Because in front of him.

Bold as anything.

Is Remus Lupin.

Remus fucking Lupin.

Just thinking his name makes Regulus start laughing again.

It's so absurd. How can none of them see how absurd it is?

How unbelievable?

"All that inbreeding really makes you lot a bit wacky doesn't it?" Greyback says, sounding mildly amused.

The problem is, Regulus realizes, none of them were there. At Hogwarts. None of them saw James and Sirius and Lupin and Pettigrew. They don't understand. That Remus Lupin would never switch sides. Would never betray his friends. And it's as he's thinking this that another thought occurs to him. Probably the one he should have had first.

"You're a werewolf?" he chokes out, struggling to get his hysterics under control.

Remus looks thoroughly uncomfortable, maybe a bit like he's feeling sick, the boy next to him glancing between him and Regulus.

"You two know each other?" he asks Lupin specifically. Remus flounders for a minute before Lucius helpfully steps in.

"Old school chums, aren't you Regulus?"

For the first time Lupin meets his gaze but then he quickly looks away.

"More acquaintances really," Regulus says flatly.

"Small world," Greyback is clearly uninterested, though the boy next to Lupin keeps looking at him like he wants to say something. Wants to reach out. Which is interesting.

"So Malfoy, tell me, have you lot got a plan then?" Greyback leans back in his chair with his legs spread wide. He has scruff for a beard and clever eyes, scars marking up his weathered skin. Regulus expects this is a man who is often underestimated.

"Of course," Lucius says smoothly. "Our little potion master here has managed to create a version of a Sleeping Draught that will become a gas when exposed to oxygen. Me and some others who still have ties within the Ministry are working on gaining access to their Floo network," he smiles then. Or maybe it's more of a leer. "It's been incredibly easy."

"I reckon most things are for you," Greyback says.

If he's expecting humility from Lucius he doesn't get it, the blond man simply bows his head in agreement. "The potions will go through the Floo first, uncorked, and then we will follow, divided into teams, each tackling different floors in the same manner."

Greyback seems to consider this for a moment before speaking again. "And how exactly are we meant to get through the gas without falling asleep?"

"Bubble-head charm has been effective so far," Lucius looks at Regulus for confirmation and Regulus nods.

"Not gonna work for us," Greyback says bluntly, causing a bemused expression to cross Lucius's face.

"Oh?" he asks cutely. "And why is that? Have werewolves suddenly developed some sort of immunity to magic that I'm not aware of?"

"No, but some of us are uncomfortable with it."

Lucius makes a derisive noise. "Ah, I see, well, I'm sure we could find someone willing to cast the spells on your skittish pups."

The boy next to Lupin growls, which honestly doesn't help his case much, but Lupin places a hand on his arm, grounding him.

"No," Greyback says again. "They are uncomfortable with the idea of having magic cast on them, not just casting it themselves. We'll have to find another way."

Lucius is now clearly getting annoyed. "Making demands are you?" there is the edge of a threat in his voice that Greyback obviously picks up, leaning forward, elbows on his knees, hands clasped.

"I am," he says slowly and deliberately, looking right at Lucius, his pupils flickering between round orbs and slits.

"I'd be careful Greyback," Lucius says, but the bigger man only smiles, showing all his teeth.

"Oh but I don't think I need to be," he says confidently. "Because you never would have come to us if you weren't desperate. Don't think I don't know that. You need bodies and I have them, but that doesn't mean I'm going to bend over and let you fuck me however you want. Now, you're gonna find a way to protect my people without magic, or you're gonna be taking the Ministry by your goddamn selves."

The room is silent, the two men with eyes only for each other. Lucius isn't Snape, he isn't glaring or scowling, but there is undeniably something antagonistic in the corners of his eyes, the slight downturn of his mouth. "You're overestimating your importance," he says eventually. "After all, we still have the support of the group from Bulgaria."

Greyback snorts rudely. "The Bulgarians are flighty allies at best, they have their own ministries and Aurors to deal with. Half of them have already gone back. They might be able to help you take control like they did last time but they won't be able to help you keep it. And you and I both know that's what Voldemort's interested in now. Besides," he grins, allowing his canines to slip over his bottom lip, "we're much scarier."

Regulus thinks he sees Lupin flinch.

It's clear from every rigid angle of Lucius's body that he is not a man used to being dressed down like this. His fingers twitch threateningly close to the handle of his wand. Regulus doesn't know if Greyback even has a wand on him, but he also wonders if Lucius would be able to cast a single curse before Greyback had his teeth in his neck. And that's all it would take really. He wouldn't even have to kill him. Just get in one good bite.

He has a feeling Lucius is thinking the exact same thing.

"Regulus," Lucius says finally, a brittle politeness in his tone. "Why don't you and the other children run a long and try to find a solution to this problem, leave the grown-ups here to talk."

Greyback laughs, rubbing at his jaw. But he doesn't argue.

"You don't get to tell us what to do," the boy next to Lupin snarls.

Lucius doesn't even look at him, doesn't take his eyes off Greyback. And after another long pause the werewolf speaks.

"Do as he says Gabe."

"I—"

Greyback's head snaps in his direction. "Do you want to go out there and tell those people we're gonna have wizards performing magic on them? That they'll have to wear the spells for hours?"

The boy's lips have pressed together in a firm line.

"That's what I thought. Go on, use the basement, I don't think there's anyone down there."

With one last mutinous look the boy turns around, slamming the door open as he goes, a rather resigned Lupin looking from Greyback to Lucius, before following after him.

"Well," Lucius says to Regulus, snippier than he was earlier that morning. "Go with them, make sure they're not just down there rubbing one another's bellies or whatever the hell it is werewolves do."

Regulus could swear he sees something fiery pass over Greyback's face.

He has to jog to catch up to Lupin and the other boy—Gabe, Greyback called him. They make quick work of the narrow house, stomping down to the basement which is colder than everywhere else, the walls and floors unfinished, a drain in the middle of the room pulling everything down in a slope. There's a single metal table, and several boxes piled in the corners.

Gabe hops up onto the table, crossing his arms over his chest and looking nearly as unhappy to be there as Regulus.

"Well alright then, how the hell are we gonna keep the gas from knocking us out?"

There's an obvious answer that he waits for one of them to bring up, but instead Gabe stares very pointedly at Regulus and Remus stares very pointedly at the floor. Regulus lets the silence stretch on for a few more minutes before he eventually turns his full attention to Gabe.

"Do you have parchment? I find I always think better with a quill in my hand."

Gabe gives him a funny look. "Er—I mean we have paper and pens?"

Of course they do. "That's fine. Thank you."

Gabe pushes himself off the table, sparing a single look for Remus before taking the stairs two at a time. "I'll be back in a sec," he throws over his shoulder.

There's a moment of silence.

"You two seem close," Regulus says finally, earning him a sharp look from Lupin.

"Don't."

"Don't what?" Regulus pushes. "I mean I can't imagine you're still with my brother, considering the obvious shift in direction your life has taken. Does he know you're a werewolf by the way?"

Remus glares at him in silence.

"You know, it's funny, given your obvious deep commitment to the cause, that you can't come up with a single solution to our problem here."

"Gases are not my specialty," Remus says flatly.

"Oh come on Lupin, weren't you supposed to be the clever one? Teacher's pet and all that?"

Lupin has gone back to glaring.

"Really? Nothing? Raised by a Muggle mum and her family and you expect me to believe you've never heard of a gas mask? It's almost like you're not even trying."

That gets a reaction out of him. "And who told you I was raised by my Muggle mother? James?" there's something vaguely cold about those words. Betrayal, Regulus thinks.

"Might've been, or it might've been Sirius. I can't remember to tell you the truth," having been close, at different times, to the two men who have always loved Remus Lupin most, Regulus has unwillingly picked up quite a bit of information about him. "Regardless, my point still stands."

Lupin's eyes narrow. "How do YOU know about Muggle gas masks?"

"I've spent the better part of the last week working on a potion that turns into a gas, you think I didn't do any research?"

“On Muggle inventions?” Lupin asks skeptically.

Regulus shrugs. “Having to overcome problems without magic gives Muggles a different perspective on the elements than we have, requires them to be closer to them. Sometimes they pick up on things we miss. Most Muggle technologies are quite fascinating really.”

Lupin gives him an odd look. “That’s an interesting opinion for a Death Eater to have,” he says eventually.

Regulus stares blankly back at him. “Says the Death Eater.”

He sees a whole spectrum of emotions play across Lupin’s face. First indignation, at the insult, then realization, as he remembers the role he’s meant to be playing, and finally, fear. At having been found out.

“Careful Lupin,” Regulus says smoothly, unable to stop the small uptick in the corner of his mouth. “Your mask is slipping.”

Not that he ever really had one to begin with.

Lupin’s face has gone deathly pale. “Regulus—“

But the sound of footsteps pounding down the stairs cuts him off.

“So,” Gabe says, jumping the last two steps and dumping a pad of paper and pen on the table. “I was thinking, Muggles have these things, they’re called gas masks, they use them in wars and stuff. Maybe those might work?” he looks at them expectantly.

Regulus only smiles. “Wow, you don’t say, gas masks?” his sarcasm is lost on Gabe. “Do tell me more.”

And the boy, bless him, does.

It’s all pretty straight forward after that. Finding somewhere to buy the masks, making sure they’ll have time to test them before the day, to ensure they do hold-up against the potion. Gabe does most of the organizing, while Lupin twitches nervously beside him. Regulus can’t help but enjoy it, just a little bit.

When they come back up from the basement they find Lucius and Greyback standing in the entryway, neither of them dead or bleeding or bitten, so Regulus assumes their talk went fairly smoothly.

“Regulus?”

He looks back over his shoulder. Lupin is standing in the doorway of the kitchen, Gabe having disappeared in the room behind him, presumably joining the group of people still sitting around the table.

“Can I—can we talk?” he steps closer to Regulus, keeping his voice low, eyes darting over Regulus’s head in the direction of Lucius and Greyback. Regulus is incredibly tempted to say no, however, in the end, his curiosity wins out.

“Sure.”

Lupin nods stiffly before gesturing to the empty sitting room on Regulus’s right. There’s no door and the space is quite small, but it’ll have to do.

“Regulus!” Lucius snaps before he can make it into the room. “We’re done here, lets go, this isn’t the time for socializing.” Regulus clenches his teeth.

“You’re not my keeper Lucius,” he says clearly. “Feel free to leave without me,” he ignores the scandalized look on the older man’s face, not bothering to wait for a reply.

Lupin has his eyebrows raised when Regulus walks into the room but he ignores the question behind them. He’s not interested in discussing Lucius Malfoy.

“Go on then, talk,” he crosses his arms over his chest, both of them hugging the wall near the door, watching incase anyone comes close.

“Whatever you think you know—it isn’t what it sounded like downstairs, I’m a part of this. Part of this p-pack,” he struggles on that last word, like it gets lodged in his throat on the way up. “I’m committed to this a hundred percent.”

Regulus just stands there for a moment. Longer than is socially acceptable. Watching Lupin fidget.

“You’re really very bad at this, you know that?” he says eventually.

Lupin lets out a breath, shoulders rolling forward as he leans against the wall. Regulus almost thinks he’s going to fess up to it right then but instead he rattles off a weak; “I’m on your side. I promise you.”

“Well, consider me convinced.”

Lupin grimaces but doesn’t bother with anymore pathetic declarations of loyalty to the dark side. Instead the pair lapse into silence, allowing Regulus to properly take in the ragged boy in front of him. Lupin really does look terrible. Barely better than Regulus. He can’t help but wonder how anyone is going to win this war if they all kill themselves before it’s over.

“Sirius and James,” Regulus’s voice comes out softer than he means it to, eyes flicking over his shoulder to make sure they’re still alone. “How are they?” It’s a reckless question, but then, Lupin has been just as reckless here.

The other boy looks up, eyes curious as they run over Regulus’s face, like they’re trying to figure something out. He wonders if Lupin is actually going to keep pretending they don’t both know he’s still working for the Order, but then he speaks:

“They’re...they’re fine. Sirius is frustrated. He feels like he’s being...sidelined.”

“And is he?”

Lupin exhales, “Yeah,” he scrubs at his eyes. “Yeah he is. They don’t trust him.”

No. How could they. With a family like his.

With a Death Eater brother.

“I wondered why they sent you and not him, he’s a better liar than you are.”

Lupin laughs quietly and without much humour. “I’ll take that as a compliment.”

It isn’t one. But Regulus can see why he might be confused. “If you want to.”

“Plus, the werewolf thing kind of helps.”

Regulus nods, still trying to wrap his mind around that. Around how he could have not put the pieces together. It bothers him actually. James never could meet him on the full moon, and Lupin was always so sickly, and those scars...it’s fucking embarrassing that he didn’t figure it out.

“Haven’t bitten him yet then.”

Lupin stiffens. “Yeah, that isn’t funny.”

Regulus gives him a long look; “I suppose it isn’t,” though he’s not really sure he was joking. He doesn’t know much about werewolves, how they act, how they mate, what they can and can’t control—though he fully intends to fix that after today. He doesn’t like being in the dark about things.

“And...?” Regulus prods when Lupin doesn’t continue on his own.

“And James is...James. Trying to keep us all together. Trying to get over his parent’s deaths,” Lupin pauses and then; “He’s moved into their house with Lily.”

Ah.

“And they’re—well, they’re expecting a—“

“Regulus!” Lucius shouts from the front hall. “Lets go!”

Regulus’s hands curl into fists, nails biting into his palms. Of course Lucius stayed. If he thinks Regulus is going back to the Manor he’s out of his mind. Regulus is going home. He’s tired and he can feel the potions he took this morning wearing off.

“He’s a little all over you isn’t he?” Lupin says, casually. Like Lucius is a minor irritation.

“Regulus!”

“Jesus Christ,” Regulus rolls his eyes, turning towards the door.

“Wait—”

He does, looking back at a Lupin whose panic has resurfaced.

“Are you...fuck are you gonna...gonna tell them?”

Tell them.

That Remus Lupin is quite obviously a spy.

That no doubt every detail of their plan will be meticulously relayed to Dumbledore and his Auror friends.

That they’re going to fail.

“Tell them what?” he says finally, voice flat. “I don’t know anything.”

He is happy that the anxiety and the fear those words cause don’t make it out of his mouth or onto his face. It would expose him completely.

Lupin has that curious look in his eyes again. “I can’t figure you out,” he says finally. And Regulus nearly laughs. Because he’s not sure he’s ever figured himself out either.

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

Lupin gives him a wane smile. “If you want to.”

Regulus walks out into the hall, Greyback has gone, he doesn’t know where, Lucius standing in front of the door with his arms crossed and a pissy look on his face.

“What the hell were you doing?” he demands.

“I told you to leave without me,” is all Regulus says as he brushes past him and pushes his way outside. He instantly has to wrap his arms around his torso, having forgotten how cold it was. The light has almost completely left the sky, taking even the suggestion of the sun’s warmth with it.

“Where are you going?” Lucius demands as he follows after him.

Regulus doesn’t turn around. “Home.”

“Back to that old house all alone? Come now, come to the Manner and we’ll—”

Regulus doesn’t hear the rest of the offer, throwing himself into space, allowing his body to be broken down and reformed on the front stoop of his house. There was a time when the sight of this place filled him with dread. But now. Well. Now it’s the only place he wants to be most of the time.

“Master Regulus, is you being home?” Kreacher calls out as Regulus closes the door behind him.

“Yeah, it’s me Kreacher,” he quickly adjusts his wards and then heads towards the fireplace to close the Floo. He doesn’t want Lucius trying to get in contact. He could still send Narcissa to do his dirty work for him but Regulus will cross that bridge when he comes to it.

“Will you be wanting your dinner soon Sir?” Kreacher asks, as he finds Regulus leaning against the fireplace, fingers curling around the mantel, staring at the portrait his mother had painted of them ages ago. Two little faces blinking out at him.

“No thank you,” he finally mutters. “I’m not hungry.”

“Sir, you is not be eating anything today!”

“I ate while I was out,” he lies.

Kreacher makes a disapproving noise. “I is a house elf sir, not a moron.”

Regulus snorts, shooting Kreacher a smile over his shoulder. “I know. I promise.”

His little face softens. “You need to eat.”

“I know, I know I do,” he turns back to the painting. He remembers having been impressed by the likenesses when it was first done. Like looking in a mirror. Now he can’t recognize any of the faces. “I’m gonna take a nap,” he says finally, turning around to face Kreacher. “I’ll eat after that okay?”

The house elf does not look convinced but he doesn’t push the matter either. “I will keep it warm for you in the kitchen sir.”

Regulus smiles in a way he hopes is reassuring. “Thank you.”

It’s a long climb up to his room. To the bottles hiding behind the mirror. He turns away from his reflection when he sucks down the potions. Drinks until he stops being able to feel all his thoughts. Then he walks past his bed, and out his door and down the hall.

Walks right into Sirius’s room.

He never comes in here.

Tries to pretend it doesn’t exist.

But he’s feeling nostalgic today.

Fucking Remus Lupin.

The bed is covered in dust but he’s in no state to care, sliding under the covers and wrapping them around himself, pretending that he isn’t willingly going to walk into a trap in a few days.

And for a little while, the potions even let him believe it’s true.

Regulus is not, generally, a nervous person. But the morning before they're going to attack the Ministry he can't sit still. He's taken some Calming Draught but that's it. He doesn't want to be high for this. Not completely. Maybe that's a mistake. But it's too late now.

Kreacher is nice enough not to mention that he woke Regulus up in Sirius's bed again. Kreacher has nothing nice to say about Sirius but he knows Regulus hates it when he starts going off about him. Not necessarily because he disagrees with the sentiment, but it reminds him too much of his mother.

His mother whose owls he's been ignoring. Floo calls he's been denying. He hasn't been to Scotland in a while and he feels bad about that. But he knows the minute his father sees him he'll know. He'll just...know. And it'll break his heart, to see what a wreck Regulus has become. So really, he's being kind, staying away.

By 8:00 AM Regulus is at Malfoy Manor, the mansion already a bit chaotic, people coming in and out, making last minute arrangements. He sees the werewolves down one corridor. Sees Remus Lupin whose eyes meet his briefly before they both look away. Perhaps both equally ashamed but for different reasons.

Regulus could change his mind. He could go to Lucius right now and tell him that they've been betrayed. That Alastor Moody will almost certainly be ready for them. He thinks about it, thinks about it every time he sees Lucius—moving between rooms, having discussions, making sure everything is in place.

But if he does.

If he does tell.

Then they'll kill Lupin.

He knows they will.

And well...Regulus already killed James's parents. He can't take his brother too.

Which is perhaps a weak reason for such a big act. Perhaps the wrong reason for doing the right thing. But if he's really brutally honest with himself, it is the reason that he lets Lucius walk away.

"I'm so fucking pumped," Evan says from beside him, bouncing on the balls of his feet and stretching out his arms like he's getting ready to run a marathon. "This is gonna be brilliant."

Regulus says nothing, staring very pointedly at the front doors, watching people file in. He saw Narcissa briefly this morning. She isn't showing yet, but she places her hands on her stomach often enough that you can't forget that she's pregnant. Regulus found he couldn't watch. He was grateful she didn't try to talk to him.

"Oi," Evan elbows him, "buck up buttercup, you look fucking depressed."

“You have an unhealthy amount of energy this morning, I’m just trying to balance you out,” Regulus drawls, fingers once again tapping nervously against the side of his thigh. He just needs to get this over with. He just needs to know how bad it’s going to be.

“I think you’ll find I have the exact right amount of energy thank you very much,” and then; “though it’s possible I had like three shots of espresso.”

Regulus gags a little. “Christ.”

“I just wanted to make sure I was awake, you know how I am with mornings.”

He does.

“I like you in the morning, you’re a mess, it’s incredibly amusing.”

Evan snorts. “Aw babe, you say the sweetest things,” he reaches over and musses Regulus’s hair. Reg swats his hand away, which only makes Evan laugh properly. It’s at that moment that Snape comes in through the door.

He looks twitchy—twitchier than normal anyway—and his eyes scan the room until they land on Lucius who he heads straight for.

Regulus hasn’t seen Snape in days, he’s been on some sort of special mission, or at least that’s what Lucius keeps saying, never willing to share any of the specifics. At the moment the two men in question are exchanging a series of serious looking whispers, then Lucius points in the direction of his study and Snape is off again.

“...do you think you can overdose on caffeine?” Evan is rambling on. “No right? That can’t be a thing can it? They’d have to put a warning label on coffee mugs wouldn’t they?”

“Hold that thought Evan,” Regulus says as he peels off the wall and starts following Snape. “I’ll be back in a second.”

He weaves his way through the busy house. Everyone won’t be able to Floo to the Ministry from here, so they’re all trying to figure out where they’re supposed to be—whose fireplace they’re using. There are paintings, in the gallery back in Scotland, of Muggle knights, dressed in armour and mounted on horses, charging into battle, picking themselves up after it is all done. He wonders if this is what it was like for them too, before they took the field. Chaos and nerves and shouting across ballrooms.

Well, okay, maybe not that last bit.

The hallway by Lucius’s study is surprisingly empty, far enough from all the action that no one has bothered to wander over. The door is shut and Regulus is almost certain Snape will have cast some kind of silencing charm, but he walks towards it anyway, hugging the wall, listening intently.

He’s shocked when he actually hears voices.

“—that all?”

“I think there may have been more but unfortunately I wasn’t able to hear it, I was...well, the barman found me and I had to make a quick exit.”

“I see.”

He’s speaking to the Dark Lord, his voice unmistakable, he must be using the fireplace because there’s no way Voldemort was able to slip into the Manner without anyone noticing.

“Did they suspect anything?”

“I don’t know,” Snape admits. “But they let me go, and I made sure before coming here that they didn’t have me followed, so they can’t suspect much.”

There’s a lengthy pause and Regulus strains his ears, listening for any sign that Snape might be headed for the door, but there is no screeching of chair legs or squeaking of floorboards. Only complete silence.

And then:

“Tell me again,” the Dark Lord asks.

He can hear Snape taking in a deep breath, like he’s bracing himself, “The seer woman said; the one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches... Born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies.”

The seer woman.

Snape has been spying on a seer.

A seer who has just prophesied the potential fall of the Dark Lord.

“Thank you Severus,” Voldemort says finally. “You’ve done well,” and then, as though he hasn’t just heard the foretelling of his own demise. “How are things progressing there?”

“I’ve only just arrived but Lucius seems to have things in hand. I expect everything will go according to plan.”

“I should certainly hope so. And was your...time with Black at all enlightening?”

Regulus feels something cold drip down his spine.

“He was as committed to the project as I was,” Snape says, without sounding particularly happy about it. “I do not believe we have to worry about his loyalty.”

“Good, well, we both have business to attend to then. I’ll see you when this is all done.”

“Yes, goodbye my lord.”

Regulus is already walking away, barely able to keep himself from breaking into a jog. But that would only draw attention. Thankfully, he manages to make it out of the hallway without

hearing the sound of the door opening behind him.

“Jesus, where did you go, you look scared shitless,” Evan says when he makes it back to him.

“Nowhere, nothing. Just...nerves I guess.”

Some of the humour fades from Evan’s face. “Hey,” he says, reaching out and placing a hand on the back of Regulus’s neck. It’s work not to flinch but he manages it. And really, it’s not so bad. It’s only Evan.

“We’re gonna be okay, alright?” Evan says seriously, ducking down so he can hold Regulus’s eyes. “We’ll have each other’s backs out there, you and me, we’ll get through it,” and then he grins, looking more like his normal self. “Just think about how much we can piss Barty off after, with stories of all the bad ass things we’re gonna do.”

Regulus manages a smile though he’s not sure it’s particularly convincing. He wants to tell him. He wants so badly to tell him—to go home. This is a trap. They know we’re coming. They’ll be waiting for us.

But Evan isn’t like Regulus. He would say something. If he found out that Regulus had betrayed them he would say something and Regulus would never make it to the end of this day. So instead he swallows, throat tight.

“We’ll have each other’s backs,” he repeats.

Evan gives his neck a squeeze before letting go. “Fuck I can’t wait to kick some ass.”

Evan doesn’t have to wait much longer. It’s maybe an hour later that they’re being shuffled towards their assigned fireplace. They’re high ranking enough that they get to leave from the Manor, others Apparating off to their designated locations. Even with the Manor’s multiple fireplaces they still have to go in waves. Evan and Regulus are part of the second wave, standing in line behind those going ahead of them. Everyone watching the clock.

At exactly 11:00 the potions will be sent through. At 11:05 the first wave will follow. At 11:10 the second. Once they clear the atrium Evan and Regulus will be making their way to the Auror Department along with a handful of others, including Lucius and Greyback.

Evan is bouncing on the balls of his feet, hair a mess from constantly running his hands through it. He looks ridiculous with the bubble currently wrapping around his head, but Regulus supposes they all do.

“Relax,” Regulus hisses, but Evan only shoots him a smile.

“Can’t. I just need to fucking kill something already y’know?”

Something.

Not someone.

Regulus thinks back to Azkaban. To the screaming and the darkness and the rats. To a man in a cell begging for his life.

Regulus isn't sure what his face does but it's enough to stop Evan's bouncing. He looks at him confused, brows drawing together. "What—"

Regulus waves him off and Evan, surprisingly, lets the issue drop.

And then it's 11:00.

And then it's 11:05.

The line of people in front of them moves, disappearing into the fire. And Regulus feels his stomach fill with acid. It's been a long time since he felt something this viscerally. It's overwhelming, his hands shaking. When his toes reach the edge of the hearth he really thinks he might lose his nerve.

Fuck,

he thinks.

Fuck what have I done?

Evan gives him a little shove, gentle, encouraging, and Regulus lets it carry him forward. Shoes scuffing in the embers as he says the words and feels his body being ripped away. His friend's smiling face disappearing in a blur of motion.

Regulus trips over something on his way out of the fireplace, instantly landing on his hands and knees on the hard stone floor of the Ministry atrium. This turns out to be a blessing because half a second later a curse flies right through the space where his chest would have been. There's a lot of noise and movement and he still hasn't managed to get his bearings when Evan appears. Regulus reaches out, wanting to pull his friend down and out of the line of fire, but he doesn't need to. Evan trips just like he had.

"Ow," he hisses. "What the fuck. Why aren't they fucking asleep? And why are there so goddamn many of them?"

Regulus shakes his head, looking up to see a crowd of red robed Aurors, all with bubbles protecting their noses and mouths. Evan curses again.

"Someone ratted," he snarls, and then; "What the fuck did we trip on any—" he cuts off, and Regulus looks over at him, and then follows his gaze to their feet.

A body.

One of the people who had gone through before them.

"Fuck!" Evan scrambles up, looking awfully woozy for someone who had just been talking about how badly he wanted to kill people. Regulus gets up too, grabbing Evan's arm and yanking him away from the fireplace. They're sitting ducks here.

“We should move it,” Evan says numbly, as Regulus maneuvers them through the crowd, stepping over empty potion bottles as he goes. “So no one else trips.”

“Tripping is the only reason we’re still alive,” he finds a pillar, it has a chunk taken out of it but at least it’s something solid they can press their backs to.

Around them is chaos, Death Eaters and Aurors and werewolves all fighting. The bodies of the unsuspecting and unprepared piling up by the fireplaces. Regulus wonders if any of the first wave even made it through.

“Reg—“ Evan barely gets out before he’s tackling Regulus to the ground, pain shooting through Regulus’s side as he lands hard on his shoulder with Evan on top of him. A few more chunks fly off of the pillar above as the curse hits it instead of Regulus’s head.

“Fuck,” Regulus groans.

“Sorry, I just saw it coming and I didn’t know what else to do.”

“It’s fine. Just maybe get off of me.”

Evan laughs. “Yeah, alright,” he sits back on his knees watching Regulus struggle to push himself up. “Are you—oh shit.”

Regulus follows Evan’s gaze towards the three Aurors advancing on them.

“Oh shit.”

Both of them scramble off the ground, wands raised.

Regulus throws up a shield first, dropping it the second the curses hit and firing back a Jelly-leg jinx before ducking behind the pillar. The sound of screaming lets him know that he hit one of them, another stray curse crashing into the wall behind him. He pulls himself back out from behind the pillar, hurling a Stupefy at the still advancing Auror, but the man blocks it without a second thought.

They go back and forth, easier now that it’s one on one. Regulus keeps checking on Evan out of the corner of his eye, but the other boy is grinning again. Taunting his opponent. For all his other faults, Evan has always been a damn good fighter.

“Fuck,” the word punches out of Regulus as he’s thrown backwards, some spell clipping his shoulder. He didn’t hear it, maybe the Auror was casting silently, there’s so much noise that he can’t really tell. He slams into the wall and slides down onto the floor, trying to catch his breath, trying to figure out what the hell’s been done to him, his entire body aching with the impact of the hit.

And his wand.

Fuck his wand.

His eyes focus on the spot on the floor a few feet away where it landed. He starts dragging himself towards it when a boot drives right into the centre of his chest, causing him to choke and cough as he's pinned against the floor, the Auror standing over him, watching as Regulus struggles.

He wishes he could say, that faced with the end of a wand, he became dignified. Composed. That he shot off some one liner, like

do it.

I fucking dare you.

But that isn't what happens. Instead he scrambles and flails, like a bug about to be crushed, pathetic little grasping noises escaping him as he tries to get the boot off his fucking chest.

"You know, I knew your father," the man above him says. "Pompous piece of work he was," he drives the point of his wand right into Regulus's cheek and Regulus actually fucking sobs.

Like a child.

"I'd prefer to be pointing this at him. But I suppose you'll do. Avada-Ke—"

There's a flash of green light and Regulus is loathed to admit that he closes his eyes. He isn't sure what he's expecting it to feel like. No one's ever told him. The killing curse. Death. He doesn't know what he's waiting for. Doesn't even know what he's afraid of.

The pressure disappears from Regulus's chest, and he finds he's able to take full breaths again. Though they're stuttered and choked. He doesn't know what's going on. He doesn't want to open his eyes.

"Reg! Reg!" he feels two hands land on his shoulders and that's enough to get Regulus to look. Evan is crouched down in front of him, cheeks flushed, eyes bright. "You're alright, you're okay. I got him. I got him."

At first Regulus doesn't understand, mind moving too slow, and then he turns his head and sees the body of the Auror lying on the ground.

"Fuck."

Evan nods, before shoving Regulus's wand back into his hand. "You really ought to hold onto that."

Regulus lets out a shaky laugh, meeting Evan's eyes, his friend gives him a wink before he stands up, offering Regulus his hand. "C'mon, lets go." And as much as Regulus would rather just stay here on the floor, he takes it.

He's never really been in a fight like this. Never really been in very many fights at all, actually. Duels, sure. Wrestling matches with Sirius when they were little. But this is the first time that the war has ever felt like a proper war to Regulus. The type you read of in history books. Except when you read about it everything always seems so much clearer. Regulus

always pictured it taking place on a field somewhere, with two opposing sides facing one another in neat, little lines, with very clear distinctions between one side and the other.

That isn't what this is like.

There are no clear formations or boundaries. Everything is chaos. Spells flying around, bits of the Ministry being torn away and turned into weapons. Regulus doesn't let himself linger on the bodies. You'd think he'd be used to it. Violence. Given the way he grew up. But then. Once a coward always a coward. Or something like that.

He fares better in his subsequent duels than his first. No one gets him on the ground again which Regulus considers a win. He's just walking away from his latest opponent—a woman now struggling against the magical ropes binding her to one of the pillars, when Evan falls into step beside him. He has a swelling black eye and his shirt is stained red from the slashing curse he was struck with—Regulus had thankfully managed to quickly heal the wounds.

"You just gonna leave her?" Evan asks, swerving to avoid an incoming piece of rubble.

"I threw away her wand, and the charm is strong, she isn't a threat."

Evan looks at him for a minute before shaking his head, clapping Regulus on the back. "Stop making more work for yourself Reg, just Avada them and be done with it, yeah?"

Regulus wonders how it is that Evan learned his unforgivable curses. If his family took him into the back garden and made him torture rabbits too. Or if he didn't need that. If it came naturally to him. The way it never did to Reg.

It's not because he's a good person. He has no illusions about that. He doesn't think he would mind so terribly if someone came along and killed the Auror he just left behind. Her death means very little to him. He just doesn't want to be the executioner.

Coward, he hears whispered again in the back of his head.

The voice sounds like Sirius.

"Holy shit is that Moody?"

Regulus follows Evan's gaze to the grizzled looking man standing in front of the fountain. He swings his wand over his head like a lasso, casting a spell Regulus doesn't recognize but that appears to be strong enough to take out four of the Death Eaters charging towards him. It's an impressive display of power that Regulus has never witnessed before and he feels his chest grow tight.

"How much do you wanna bet I can take him?" Evan asks, eyes on the Head Auror, greedy and alight with the adrenaline of his last fight.

"Leave it Evan."

“Yeah but fucking imagine,” he practically licks his lips his words are so hungry, “if I was the one to take down Alastor fucking Moody. I think the Dark Lord would give me a bloody knighthood.”

“I mean it Evan, leave it.”

But when Evan looks over at him Regulus knows not a word he’s said has gotten through. “Come on Reg, have a little faith in me yeah?” He gives him a wink before charging forward.

“Evan—fuck,” Regulus reaches out to grab him, to hold him back, but Evan is too quick and when Regulus starts to chase after him he finds his path blocked.

The Auror in question doesn’t bother trying to curse him and instead punches Regulus right in the jaw, sending him reeling. Thankfully he manages to stay on his feet, firing a curse the minute he can. The Auror blocks it easily, advancing again.

He’s tall, several inches taller than Regulus, and built like a house. No wonder he used his fists first. Regulus backs up, firing off another spell that is casually tossed aside. And another.

And another.

And another.

All knocked out of the way as though they’re nothing but flies. He clenches his jaw. This is starting to get irritating.

The man keeps advancing, and Regulus realizes that he has no intention of fighting back with his wand. He’s just going to keep blocking Regulus’s spells until he can get his hands on him again. And at this rate that isn’t going to take long. Regulus needs a new strategy.

He looks around desperately, still backing up, trying to keep the giant in front of him from closing the gap between them. His eyes snag on the windows above them—the hundreds and hundreds of offices with views of the atrium.

He isn’t as good with silent casting as he’d like, but simple things he can manage. Like summoning charms. Perhaps, if he can get one of the panes of glass loose and bring it down on the advancing Auror with enough force, he might just get out of this.

“Funny,” he says, trying to distract the man. “Here I thought Aurors were supposed to be good at duelling.” He starts the incantation in his head, trying to concentrate, to visualize, to keep his wand as out of sight as possible.

“And here I thought Death Eaters were supposed to be scary,” the man doesn’t smile when he delivers the line. Regulus tries his best not to be offended.

He focuses on the second floor, the third office from the right.

Accio window.

Accio window.

Accio window.

“Tell me, how exactly did you manage to get past your OWLs? Did you just punch the Professor?” The man is still advancing and if he gets his hands on Regulus before he manages this spell Regulus will be absolutely fucked.

“If you’re such a skilled duelist why don’t you try getting past my shield little boy?” He thinks Regulus is a joke.

And Regulus can’t really blame him.

Except that—

The pane of glass cracks when it rips out of its frame, though it doesn’t shatter, careening right for them over the hundreds of heads below, the Auror reaching for Regulus’s neck.

“You’ve been a disappointment Regulus Black,” fuck, does everyone know who he is? “I thought you were going to put up more of a fight.”

He feels the Aurors’s fingertips brush against his collar at the exact same moment that the pane of glass crashes into him, shattering over the man’s head. Regulus flinches backwards, using his arms to shield his face as debris scatters everywhere. When he looks up again the man in front of him is bleeding from about a dozen places, shattered glass piling up like snow at his feet. The Auror stares back at him in a dazed kind of way, swaying slightly before he tries to take a step forward and ends up crumpling to the ground.

Regulus is breathing like he’s just run a mile, hands shaking slightly as he stares at the heap of Auror in front of him. He doesn’t think he’s dead, knows that he should fix that. And yet... his wand remains at his side.

There’s a booming scream from across the Atrium, loud enough that it rises above all the other noise. All the other screaming. It sounds like thunder, like it could shake the foundations of the city.

There, at the fountain, is a hunched over Alastor Moody, gripping his face as blood gushes into his hands and down his forearms, disappearing into the red of his uniform. And in front of him, is a beaming Evan Rosier.

“Holy shit,” Regulus mutters under his breath, suddenly moving again, trying to get to his friend.

Evan fires off another curse but Moody blocks it, even with one hand still clutching his face, quickly returning fire. Regulus tries to maneuver his way across the floor, through duelling pairs and over the various debris the fighting has caused. Moody and Evan come in and out of his line of sight, bobbing and weaving around one another. Regulus has no idea what spell Evan hit Moody with but he really is bleeding badly.

Merlin,

he thinks as he gets closer.

What if he really does it? What if Evan really—

The spell hits him right in the chest.

Evan that is.

Hits Evan right in the chest. Which is funny because Regulus feels it. Feels it like another giant Auror has decided to drive their fist into him. For a moment he can't move. He just watches.

Waits.

Waits for Evan to get up.

To laugh.

To make some stupid inappropriate joke.

But he doesn't.

Doesn't move an inch. Not even when Moody walks over to him, no longer covering the monstrous gash on his face that looks like it's taken half his nose. Not even when Moody spits on the ground beside his head, before turning away.

That's when Regulus starts running.

He lands on his knees beside Evan's body. His eyes are open. They stare across the room. They don't blink. Don't move.

"Evan?" his voice shakes as he slides his hands under his friend's torso and picks him up. He's still warm. "Evan?"

He's dead.

Regulus knows that.

Really he does. He understands. He watched it happen. He can feel the unnatural stiffness already starting to take hold.

He knows that he's dead he just...he doesn't know what to do with that. He pulls his friend into his lap, holding him close. Because they're supposed to be here together. To have each other's backs. Because he can't just—just leave him. Not alone.

This is your fault,

says the voice in his head.

You betrayed him. You did this.

You knew this was a trap. And you let him come anyway.

“I’m sorry,” he whispers, rocking slightly. “I’m so sorry.”

He knows, deep down, that Evan Rosier was not a very good person.

But he also thinks it’s possible, that he was the only one in Regulus’s life who ever really loved him unconditionally.

And that loss feels...profound.

“Regulus?”

His head shoots up, he feels like he’s in a daze, everything suddenly less real. This sensation is compounded by the fact that the person standing across from him is Frank Longbottom. The former Gryffindor Quidditch captain. Head boy. For a second Regulus feels like he’s back in school, reality sort of slipping around him, all wobbly and undefined. And then he sees Longbottom’s wand move.

Regulus lets go of Evan.

Because he doesn’t know how to fight with a body in his arms.

Because he’s always been good at letting people down when it comes to saving himself.

The spell is only an Expelliarmus, he feels it whiz past his ear as he rolls to his knees and then his feet, darting into the crowd. He doesn’t know if Longbottom is following. Doesn’t know why he doesn’t turn around and fight. Maybe because he’s always liked Frank Longbottom. He was a good Quidditch player. A better captain. Another person who matters to James.

He doesn’t want to be here anymore, all will to fight draining out of him. He wants to go home. Wants to drown out the buzzing inside his chest. His head.

Fuck.

Someone we’ll have to tell his mum.

Someone will have to tell Evan’s mum that he’s dead.

That’s the last thought he has before he’s hit—part of the fountain blown off in a misdirected spell. It catches his temple, slamming him into the wall beside him. The world gives a great tremble.

And then all there is is black.

“Get up!”

Regulus grumbles, turning over, trying to swat Kreacher away as he buries his head in his pillows, he already has one hell of a hangover and he hasn’t even opened his eyes.

“Jesus fucking Christ,” someone grabs hold of the back of his shirt and yanks him up to his feet, causing a searing pain to slice through his brain.

“Ahh,” he cries, clutching his head, which is hot and wet and sticky. He stumbles against the person who dragged him up, his legs shaking. It feels like he’s on the deck of a ship, the floor beneath him moving.

That’s when the noise hits him. It’s so fucking loud. Too fucking loud to be his bedroom. And whoever he’s leaning against is too fucking tall to be Kreacher. He opens his eyes—a mistake—it burns, it’s so bright, the lancing pain in his brain back in full force.

“Move,” the person holding him up snaps. “Fucking move,” he shoves him forward, still gripping Regulus by the back of his shirt which is the only reason he doesn’t instantly fall to the floor.

Regulus tries to think. It’s hard when he’s this goddamn dizzy and nauseous and in pain. He needs to figure out where he is, what’s happening. He needs to figure it out now. He forces his eyes open again. It really goddamn hurts but he doesn’t let them close. There’s people. Chaos. The fountain.

The fountain.

The Ministry.

The coup.

The betrayal.

Evan.

Regulus gags, trying to stop, trying to grab hold of his knees and breathe but the person pushing him doesn’t let him. Shoving him relentlessly forward despite his weak protests.

“You can’t stop. It’s already a miracle we haven’t been spotted.”

The voice is vaguely familiar. Regulus forces himself to look over his shoulder even though moving his eyes feels like having nails dragged across his brain. It takes him a second, because the man is wearing a mask, because his brain just got smashed against a fucking stone wall. But eventually. He gets there.

“Lupin?” he asks, voice weak.

“Just shut up and keep walking okay?”

Regulus doesn’t have any idea what’s going on but he’s honestly in no position to fight. So he lets himself be dragged across the atrium towards what looks like the reception area. Everything is coming to Regulus in bits and pieces. Like his brain is a radio that keeps losing signal. He sees the floor. Then a desk. His shoes. Lupin’s arm.

And then all the sudden Lupin is shoving him into some kind of box. The minute Lupin lets go of him he collapses to the ground in the corner. He wonders if he's cracked his skull. It sure as hell feels like it.

"Hey!" Lupin snaps his fingers in front of Regulus's face, causing him to blink up at him. That hurts too. Blinking. "Stay awake okay? You have to stay awake."

Regulus isn't sure why. Not being awake sounds like an excellent idea right now.

"This is the visitors entrance," Lupin is explaining. "I'm going to get it to take you up, it'll dump you onto Whitehall, then you need to Apparate the hell away from here."

There's no way Regulus is going to be able to Apparate in the state he's in. And the grimace on Lupin's face suggests he knows that too.

"Floo?" Regulus finally mutters. Because that would be so much easier, but Lupin shakes his head.

"Moody's already had the Floo network closed. They'll be coming this way soon to shut this off as well. Keep everyone in. So this is your only way out and you need to go now."

There are about a dozen more things Regulus has to ask him, not least of which is "why". Why are you doing this? But then, if he had to guess, Regulus would imagine it's probably the same reason he didn't tell anyone that Remus was a spy.

James.

"Okay," Lupin exhales, straightening up. "I'm sending you now." He turns to the weird contraption on the wall, tapping in some numbers before shooting Regulus one last lingering look and slipping out of the box.

A second later it starts to move.

The silence of the booth is soothing after the noise of the atrium. Though it also makes it nearly impossible to ignore the relentless thumping of his injured head. He closes his eyes.

Stay awake okay?

Lupin whispers in his ear.

You have to say awake.

The box jolts as it comes to a stop, Regulus's eyes flying open again, met with the sight of a bustling city street. It's grey out, the wind banging angrily against the walls around him. Regulus stumbles and slips as he pulls himself to his feet, he can smell the blood dripping down the side of his face almost as much as he can feel it.

"Steady on mate," a man in a beige suit says as Regulus practically spills out the doors of the box. The man gives him a dirty look but doesn't stop.

Swaying, Regulus reaches for the nearest wall, feeling his way along it until he gets to an alley. Small and narrow, between two white buildings, he slips inside and proceeds to be sick. On his hands and knees. Beside the bins. It's mostly stomach acid, he hasn't eaten much. When his body has finally finished he presses his back to the wall behind him, wiping his mouth on his sweaty hand and looking at his wand.

He has to Apparate. He has to get out of here. Even if the Aurors don't find him—and they might—he is Regulus Arcturus Black and he's not about to die here with the rubbish. But he's also weak, and in pain, and he can't even walk let alone fucking Apparate.

He grits his teeth, trying to force his head to cooperate for one second. Just long enough to get him home. Tries to stop the ground from moving and the colours from blending and the overcast light from feeling like a sharp sliver being driven into his brain.

Inhale.

Exhale.

Inhale.

Exhale.

“Okay,” his voice cracks as he lifts his wand. “Okay. Okay,” he squeezes his eyes shut. And casts the spell.

The second he lands on the stoop of Grimmauld Place he's screaming. Blood curdling, bone deep, screams that he's never heard himself make. He's splinched himself. The skin ripped from his arms and back in patches. Left somewhere in the space between Whitehall and here.

It's fucking unbearable.

All he can do is lie there, bleeding and screaming and writhing in pain. And his head. His fucking head is splitting open. He's never felt anything like this. Every single part of his body feels like it's being torn apart. He's going to black out. Merlin he hopes he blacks out.

“Master Regulus!”

He tries to speak but he can't. He can't fucking stop screaming. And it only gets worse when Kreacher starts touching him. Hands on his open wounds.

“I is sorry, I is sorry, but you must get inside Sir. I is sorry.”

He wants to tell Kreacher it's okay. Really he does. But the words only blink in and out of existence. A shadow in his mouth as he collapses back onto the floor in the front hallway. Into the blissful darkness of the house.

“I will be bringing Master Regulus to the hospital sir, I will be bringing him now.”

Somehow, the fear manages to cut through the agony. “No,” Regulus mutters, his voice barely recognizable. Scratched raw and shaking.

“Sir—“

He looks at Kreacher even though it hurts. Even though it drives new holes into his brain. “That’s an order, you cannot take me to St Mungos.”

He’ll be arrested.

Or something worse.

Kreacher looks down at him so sadly, large eyes filling with tears. “But sir, you are needing saving.”

Reality tilts.

Do you need to be saved Reg?

A boy in a tower. The night sky behind him.

“James,”

Yes.

“James,”

Please.

“James,”

Help me. Please help me.

“James.”

He doesn’t know why that’s all he can say, when there are so many other things trapped inside of him. Desperate to be let out.

But he supposes there are worse last words to have.

PART III PETER

Peter Pettigrew is a very average person. He knows that. Has always known that. Mediocrity seems to be sown into the seams of his being. So he has never understood why James Potter, a boy who puts the sun to shame, ever bothered to befriend him at all.

The first time Peter met James was not on the Hogwarts express. It was at his Great Aunt Betsy’s 100th birthday. She was somehow distantly related to Euphemia and, as a result, the Potters were there.

They'd been eight at the time, him and James, but already the room seemed to orbit around James like he was the singular point in the universe. Children and adults both were enchanted by him. Peter had stayed away. Too timid. Too embarrassed. He'd had a slight lisp when he was younger and his mother cut his hair, so it always came out looking like a mixing bowl had been placed on his head. Even at eight he had an acute awareness that he was not...cool.

So instead of embarrassing himself he snuck upstairs, where he knew his Aunt kept her collection of horse figurines. He rather liked playing with those. Which was where James found him.

"Woah, neat."

Peter had jumped, startled by the boy with the messy hair and giant glasses. James had walked right up to him, holding one of the horses up and inspecting it, then placing it back down.

"How do you play?" he'd asked Peter, who had felt rather certain someone was pulling a prank on him. Why on earth would the coolest kid at the party leave everyone behind to come up here and hang out with him?

"...Hello?" James tilted his head quizzically.

Oh no. Peter was being weird.

"Hi."

James smiled, a little confused, but still bright enough that Peter felt he had to look away.

"So...how does it work? The game I mean," James shook his horse for emphasis.

"Oh, oh I don't know. Or—I mean—I just kinda..." he shrugged, before demonstrating moving his horse around the top of the dresser on his makeshift course.

"Cool," James said, even though it definitely wasn't, joining him with his own horse. "Hey, you wanna race?" Peter had met his gaze again, surprised to still find it empty of mockery. He had a rather hard time fitting in, most kids seemed to think he was odd, or not worth their time. It was new to him, this easy camaraderie. This olive branch.

"Yeah," he smiled slowly. "Yeah okay."

And just like that, Petter Pettigrew made a friend.

Peter was there. The first time James Potter fell in love. And it wasn't with Lily Evans, though he knows everyone thinks so. Everyone, maybe, except for Lily herself.

Peter had grown too complacent, that was the problem. Too comfortable with the idea that James Potter was his best mate. That he always would be. It wasn't like there hadn't been chances, between his Great Aunt's birthday and the day they got on the Hogwarts Express for the first time. At any point James could have gone off and found himself a new friend, and he

never had. Never made Peter feel less than, or unworthy, and eventually Peter had managed to forget, or at least push to the back of his mind, that he was those things. All of them.

And then Sirius Black had sauntered into their compartment.

It would have been easier, really, if it had been Lily. Because Peter was never going to be for James what Lily was. But Sirius, Sirius was the embodiment of everything Peter should have been. That James Potter's best mate should have been. And the moment those two were in the same space, even when they had barely spoken more than just their names, something changed. Two sparks come to life. It was impossible to look away. And Peter really had tried.

It used to be that Remus was Peter's ally. Sometimes, when James and Sirius would bounce off of each other too fast for anyone else to get a word in, Remus would look at Peter and Peter would look right back and it was like, the two of them understood one another. It was its own special kind of bond. It made it feel less like he was on the outside of something and more like there were layers. That's different now...with Remus and Sirius being whatever they are.

Peter had tried for a while, to fight for his place as James's best mate. But it was a losing battle. And by the end of first year he felt exhausted by it. So he stopped trying. He doesn't think James ever noticed.

He runs a hand over his slicked back hair for the third time in the past fifteen minutes. The Portkey has brought him somewhere on the continent, he isn't sure where. It's warm here, the sun beating down outside so fiercely that even standing in the shaded entryway he's still sweating profusely.

Or maybe that's the nerves.

He always gets anxious before these meetings, it's only natural. But this time is worse. Because this time he's messed up. The very thought makes his stomach squirm. He'd been doing so well. For once in his life he'd been excelling at something, not just barely scraping by. And now...

He passes his weight between his feet, wringing his hands out in front of his stomach. The last time he'd felt this terrified was probably the first time he'd met with Voldemort. It's a scary thing, switching sides. Brave, is what Voldemort had called it. It had felt quite good to hear that, from a man like him. Someone so smart and so talented. Someone who was, himself, willing to take on the government and the accepted order of society for what he believed in.

It isn't that Peter has much of a problem with Mudbloods really. That isn't why he did it. I mean, he likes Lily. And he likes Mary. But he's not willing to die for them. And he thinks that's fair, because he doubts very much that they'd die for him.

"Mr. Pettigrew?"

Peter jumps as a man with an intimidatingly deep voice steps out of the shadows.

“Er—yeah?”

“Our lord will receive you now.”

He turns on his heel and Peter assumes he’s probably meant to follow so he does, tripping a little as he goes, thankful the man is facing forward and doesn’t see. Everything about this building is narrow, the hallway not wide enough for two people to walk side by side, the ceiling domed, with ornate copper chandeliers hanging down every few steps. And the heat. It really is bloody hot. Peter can feel his clothes growing damp.

They walk straight for a long time. There are doors on either side of them but no corners or twists and Peter thinks it must be a spell because he doesn’t remember the building being this long from the outside.

Eventually the man in front of him slows to a stop, gesturing to the nondescript door beside him that looks like every other one they’ve passed.

“He’s waiting for you,” his voice fills up the tiny space and makes Peter want to cower away. That’s all the instruction he gets before the man continues down the hall. Peter tries to squint through the shadows, to see the end, but he can’t. Eventually, he’s forced to face the door.

“Come in,” says a high voice after he hesitantly knocks, like he’s hoping whoever’s inside won’t hear and he’ll just be able to walk away.

The room smells heavily of something that makes Peter’s head swim—lavender? Sandalwood? The walls are plaster, cracked, old, faded green paint covering them. The floors dressed in luxurious carpets, a heavy oak desk at one end of the room and heavy oak bookshelves on the other, the same copper chandelier as the ones in the hallway hanging above their heads.

Voldemort is standing in front of a painting, his back to Peter, hands held behind him. For a moment neither of them speak. A long moment, as far as Peter is concerned. He fidgets at the door, trying to decide whether or not he’s expected to say something. Constantly second guessing himself every time he goes to announce his presence until eventually the Dark Lord puts him out of his misery.

“I expect you know why you’re here?”

Peter swallows.

He does.

The Aurors were warned about the attack.

About the gas.

All of it. It was a massacre. It’d all been outlined for him in the letter that he’d found in his flat, along with the Portkey that had brought him here. Peter isn’t exactly sure how to answer

the question though. Does Voldemort think there's a chance he didn't read the letter? Is it a rhetorical question?

"This is usually when you start babbling on about how there's no way you could have known we were walking into a trap," Voldemort once again speaks for him. "Begging for mercy, etcetera, etcetera."

Fuck.

"I didn't know," because he hadn't.

"And how exactly is that possible?" the tone of his voice is calm, steady, his eyes still on the painting in front of him, like they're just making small talk—discussing what they plan on having for supper.

Peter fidgets. "We had a meeting recently, the Order, Dumbledore and Moody announced to everyone that there's...a spy."

"I see. And did anyone question you?"

Peter almost snorts. They'd have to remember I existed first, he nearly says, but doesn't. He doesn't want Voldemort to think he isn't important enough to be able to get him the information he needs.

"No, and I pointed the finger at someone else before they could start."

Voldemort nods. "Then why didn't someone tell you about this?"

"Well," Peter swallows with some difficulty, his throat feeling tight. He pulls at his collar. "I think maybe Moody suspects that the spy is in the Order and not the Auror department," he'd been intending to keep that particular suspicion to himself but...well, he has to say something. "So he kept the Order out of it. Kept it within his department."

Another long pause.

"His suspicions will have been confirmed then. He'll know whoever is passing me information is not an Auror. If you're telling the truth that is, and you really didn't know. That you haven't just...lost your nerve. Decided to switch sides again."

Peter feels as though his whole stomach has just jumped into his chest. "I would never—my lord I would never. I am committed to you I swear."

"I'm sure you swear the same to Dumbledore," he says casually. "Backstabbers really are such finicky little things."

"I will not betray you," Peter can feel everything he's accomplished over the last few months slipping through his fingers. He had gained Voldemort's trust, his respect, completing every task given to him seamlessly. And now—now it's crumbling before his very eyes.

He licks his lips. “I swear on my life my lord, on the life of my mother and father, it is you I am faithful to and no one else. And—and I can still be useful. Even if Moody suspects an Order member there are dozens of other people it could be, he’ll never think it’s me.”

“It will make it more difficult for you to collect information though.”

Peter grimaces. “I can do it. I promise this will never happen again.”

Somehow Peter has managed to stumble into the middle of the room, arms held out, beseeching. Begging. He certainly isn’t above begging. He’s honestly pretty good at it.

“This painting,” Voldemort says when he speaks next, taking Peter completely by surprise, “is called the Flaying of Marsyas, have you seen it?”

“Er...” Peter feels lost. “No?”

Voldemort steps to the side, looking at Peter for the first time, dark eyes cutting right through him. “Come,” he gestures him forward, “look.”

Cautiously, Peter approaches. It’s a Muggle painting, that much is obvious right away because, well, no one is moving. Peter squints at it, not quite sure what he’s looking at. He’s always rather preferred landscapes when it comes to paintings—simple, straight forward, pretty. This painting is none of those things.

“The Flaying of Marsyas? So they’re...”

“Cutting his skin off,” Voldemort says. “Yes. You see, Marsyas challenged the god Appollo to a music competition. He lost, of course, but then Apollo had him strung up and skinned alive for even daring to think he could best a god.”

Something grows tight in Peter’s chest, eyes bouncing from Voldemort to the gruesome painting. “My lord—“

“It’s a lesson you see,” Voldemort interrupts him smoothly, “that tragedy will inevitably befall anyone foolish enough to think they can best their betters.”

Peter’s heart is really beginning to flutter now—a bird unwillingly caged. “My lord I promise, I promise I would never go back to them.”

He smiles and then, in a movement so quick Peter doesn’t even see it, he reaches out and grabs him by the face. Peter squeaks at the tightness of Voldemort’s grip, the sharp puncturing of his nails. He leans in close and Peter begins to squirm but he gets nowhere.

The Dark Lord speaks. “I believe you Peter Pettigrew. But I want you to understand that if you betray me, if you dare to think you can out maneuver me, I will not hesitate to hang you from a tree and carve the skin from your bones.”

He throws Peter’s face out of his hand like he can’t bare to touch it anymore, Peter stumbling back a few paces, rubbing petulantly at his injured cheek.

“I really do like the idea of flaying,” Voldemort’s voice is light again, as though nothing has happened. “Like a snake shedding its skin,” a shiver runs through Peter’s whole body when their eyes meet. When he sees the hunger in the man in front of him.

“You’re dismissed.”

Chapter End Notes

Hi! Hey! Hello!

Am I freaking out about this chapter? Maybe. Do I just freak out about every chapter now? Apparently. Turns out. Oh well. Here we are.

Sorry this took so long again, but the chapters are just getting more complicated and heavy so it takes more time.

I hope this wasn't too much...I feel like Regulus chapters are always kinda a lot. But hey, next chapter is the Jegulus chapter so we can all look forward to that :)

Thank you all as always for sticking with me through this and being so kind even though it's the internet, I really appreciate all of you!

ALSO PSA: If you have made translations of Choices, can you get back in contact with me either via the comments or on tumblr (<https://little-shit-soph.tumblr.com/>) and give me a link and then I'll make a big post with links to all the translated versions so people can find them easier!!

Ok that's it thanks!

Chapter 51

Chapter Summary

The boys are back in town

Chapter Notes

tw referenced sexual assault

tw blood

tw referenced drug addiction (via potions)

tw suicidal ideation

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“You is not to be touching any of Master Regulus’s things.”

“Right, well, I need to—ow!”

“I said you are not to be touching!”

“Yeah, I heard you—fuck you slap hard—if you want me to help him then I’m going to need to touch things. I also need to know where he keeps his potions.”

“No one can go into Master Regulus’s lab without his permission.”

“I think maybe you can make an exception this time.”

“No.”

“You’re very unpleasant, has anyone ever told you that?”

The voices swim around in Regulus’s head as he struggles through the dark. They don’t mean anything to him. He hears them but he can’t think. Can’t understand. Noise, noise, noise. That’s all it is. They come in and out of focus, sometimes louder and sometimes quieter. But when he pushes, edges closer to the thinning of the dark, where the black becomes grey, and then almost a faint red, he starts to feel the pain again, and instantly falls back into the hole behind him. Letting it consume him.

“We have to take him to St Mungo’s.”

“NO! Master Regulus is being very clear that we cannot do that.”

“He needs a healer.”

“No!”

“Well he’s fucking bleeding out and I don’t know what to do, I’m not—I can’t—“

Something in those words pokes at Regulus’s flickering consciousness. Not the meaning, which is still lost on him, but the...sound. Breaking. Cracking. Splintering off. And he wants to fix it. Wants to pull it back together. Wants to hold all the pieces in his hands.

“Ok, alright, new plan. You’re going to go get me whatever fucking healing potions he has—pain potions, blood replenishers, Skele-gro—whatever he has. And you’re gonna get me towels and, I don’t know, if there’s a book of healing spells in this goddamn house that’d be really useful too. And I won’t touch any of it except when I use it on Regulus okay? Deal?”

“Is a bad deal.”

“Yeah well, we don’t have a lot of options right now so it’s bad deal or no deal.”

“Fine.”

“Fine.”

It hurts. His whole body hurts. It started off soft but it keeps getting brighter and brighter and soon he thinks he’s going to be on fire with it.

“God Reg,” those words are quieter than the others. Soft. Followed by something gentle brushing against the back of his hand. And he understands them. He understands. But oh how it hurts.

He whimpers, unable to hold it in anymore, his body involuntarily contracting.

“Reg? Regulus?”

He tries to speak but it just comes out as a high pathetic whine. His eyes open and close, fighting with themselves. It hurts. It hurts. It hurts.

“Please,” he can’t remember what he did. “Please, I’m sorry, please.” He tries to be good. So good and so quiet and so small. “Please stop. Please stop.” To give them no reason to punish him.

Not that they need a reason.

“Hey no, I—I’m going to make it stop, I promise. I promise I’ll make it stop okay?” the voice breaks again and Regulus squeezes his eyes shut, tears streaming down his face as he twitches and jerks and tries not to scream. Screaming always makes it worse. So does crying

but he can't stop that at this point. Never could. He tried to tell Sirius but he didn't understand.

Sirius never cried.

Except that last time.

"Kreacher! Goddamnit Kreacher! I need a fucking pain potion or something!"

The yelling hurts and he makes another injured noise as he tries to curl further in on himself. Every time he moves pain ripples across his skin.

"Sorry, fuck, I'm sorry," the voice is soft again, and suddenly close. "Regulus, can you hear me?"

He thinks about nodding but that'll hurt too much so he forces himself to speak. "Yes," it's more a rattle than a word but he can't manage anything else.

"Okay good, that's good," the voice whispers. "Everything is going to be okay, alright? I'm going—I'm going to figure out what to do and I'm going to make it stop hurting okay?"

"Okay," Regulus swallows with difficulty. He can feel the sticky hot weight of blood on his skin. He doesn't know where it's coming from. He tries to ignore it. Ignore the way it makes his stomach lurch.

"I'm sorry I cried."

The voice doesn't speak for a long time and when it does it's rough.

"It's okay. It's okay, you can cry."

Which Regulus knows isn't true. Has never been true, but he doesn't say so. Because it hurts to speak. To think. Even breathing sends spasms of pain along his spine.

"What did I do?" he manages after a few more seconds, grimacing with the effort. "Sirius what did I do to make them so angry?"

"Oh," the voice hitches, like all the oxygen has suddenly been punched out of it. "Reg I'm not—"

There's a crack that has Regulus flinching, wishing desperately that he could shut his ears the same way he shuts his eyes. His head feels nauseous—that's the only way to describe it. Dizzy and achy and sick.

"Can you not do that in here," the voice hisses, "loud noises hurt his head."

"He is waking?" another voice whispers back.

"Yeah, sort of, he won't really open his eyes and he's...he's confused."

“His head...”

“I know.”

“There is much blood on his head.”

“Yeah. I know.”

“Will he—“

“He’ll be fine. He’s going to be fine. What did you find?”

“Here is many towels sir and blood returning potions, and the purple cleaning one, and Pepperup.”

“That’s it?”

“That is all for healing sir.”

“Fucking—goddamn Reg—he has a whole goddamn potions lab in his house and this is all he has? No pain potion? Or, I don’t know, dreamlessly sleep?”

“Your voice is getting loud sir.”

“Sorry, just—I thought he would have more. It’ll take ages to brew them from scratch and...”

Something wiggles in Regulus’s head. Some...some thought he can’t quite hold. Some memory. Of potions. Of glass bottles. Of fear.

“What about Dittany? Did you see any of that?”

“Dittany?”

“Yeah it’s like...it’s a plant. It has little round green leaves and a green stem.”

“A plant. And it will be helping?”

“You can chew it, for small wounds. I don’t know if it’ll do much for the rest but it can’t hurt.”

“I is going back and checking sir.”

“Yeah—okay, yeah. Thanks. I’ll...fuck, I’ll try to figure out what else to do.”

There’s another crack.

“Goddamnit Kreacher.”

Potions. Bottles. Fear.

Potions. Bottles. Fear.

Potions. Bottles.

Potions.

He can see a floor covered in empty bottles.

He can see his hand uncorking one in his bathroom.

He can see Snape.

Snape.

And potions.

And empty bottles.

In his bathroom.

On the floor of the Atrium.

The Atrium.

The Ministry.

Evan.

Evan.

Evan.

He forces his eyes open. The nausea in his head explodes, dozens of tiny black dots speckling his vision as he slips and flails, trying to push himself up. He's lying on the dining room table he realizes. His blood dripping over the sides.

"Woah, woah, hold on, Jesus, slow down," the voice.

And suddenly James Potter is in front of him, hands hovering over his sides, ready to catch him but not touching.

"Hey," James says softly, "your eyes are open."

Regulus stares at him, trying to blink the black dots away. Waiting for the moment that the world tilts again and he finds himself on his own. James nothing but a shadow. Some trick of the light his fucked up brain turned into a ghost. But he keeps staring. And staring. And staring. And that doesn't happen. The dots disappear and James remains.

"What the fuck is going on," Regulus forces the words out. It feels like nails are being hammered through his skull.

James huffs out a laugh. "I was kind of hoping you could tell me that."

Regulus has to drop his head, it's too heavy to hold up. He exhales slowly, trying to grab onto something solid but everything keeps slipping away. Thoughts. Words. What does he know? What does he know for certain right now?

"We're in Grimmauld?" he says suddenly.

"Yeah," James confirms. "It's about as creepy as I was expecting."

Panic grips Regulus's chest. "You can't be here," he forces himself to look up even though it makes the pain ten times worse. "James what the fuck are you doing here? It's not safe. You have—you have to go. You have to go now." He doesn't understand. Doesn't understand how he ended up bleeding on the dining room table with James Potter as his nursemaid. It doesn't make sense and his head hurts too much to figure it out.

"Hey, breathe okay? Kreacher helped me adjust the wards, shut down the Floo, no one's allowed in."

The wards.

Regulus shakes his head, regretting it instantly and gritting his teeth against the pain. "That won't stop them."

"No, but it'll give me enough of a warning to get the fuck out."

Maybe.

Merlin, maybe but still... "James," he can feel himself slipping again, the black dots coming back. "What the fuck are you doing here?" he repeats.

He can't really look at his face. Can't really look at anything, has to keep dropping his head or closing his eyes.

"Kreacher came and got me. Said you needed help. Wish he'd been a bit more specific about the kind of help but...here we are."

"Kreacher?"

Oh.

Oh of course.

You is needing saving sir.

And what had he said in reply? Over and over again?

James.

"Fuck," his hands grip his knees. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean for—I'm so sorry."

"Woah, it's okay. Reg, it's okay."

He barely stops himself from shaking his head again. “It’s really not. This is so fucking dangerous James. You can’t be here. Wards or no wards. You. Can’t. Be. Here.”

There’s a beat of silence.

“Can I touch you?”

“What?”

“Can I—“

“Yes,” Regulus says before he can finish, always pathetically easy when it comes to James Potter. “Yes.”

James’s hands are cold against his hot skin, carefully, so carefully, taking Regulus’s face between them and lifting his head up. Their eyes meet.

“I’m glad I’m here, okay?” James says, still whispering.

And Regulus doesn’t know what to say to that. Can’t organize his thoughts enough to even attempt to form a response. So he just lets his eyes close.

“You’re ridiculous,” he manages eventually.

James laughs softly. And maybe a little sadly too.

For a while they just stay like that. Regulus trying to focus only on James’s touch, trying to forget the burning across his back and arms. The insufferable pounding in his head.

Inhale.

Exhale.

Inhale.

Exhale.

“Do you know what’s hurting?” James asks eventually.

Regulus takes a moment. Nothing in his head seems to be where it’s supposed to be. Like someone has come along and messed up his memories. Dumped them out of their folders and scattered them on the floor.

“Head,” he manages eventually, forcing his brain to focus. “Something hit my head and then —“

Lupin.

“A spell?” James asks.

Lupin.

Lupin.

Lupin.

“Reg?”

“Sorry. Um—no. Just, part of the fountain. And then I splinched myself. Trying to get back. Here. Home.”

After Remus fucking Lupin saved my ass. He can’t help it, he laughs, even though it hurts, turning into some kind of choked cough halfway through.

“Hey, take it easy okay?”

He wants to tell James. Because maybe he’d actually get the joke. But he doesn’t have the energy to explain it all. Doesn’t think he could get enough air in his lungs.

“Okay,” is all he says, voice barely there.

“So splinching and a head injury? That’s not too bad.”

“Says you.”

His eyes are still closed so he can’t see James’s face, but he feels his thumb brushing over his cheek. And it’s ridiculous to think that it helps. That it takes away even a tiny part of his pain. And yet...

And yet.

“I meant we can handle it.”

“I don’t think I can handle much of anything right now.”

“I can handle it then.”

“That’s good.”

Another huff of laughter.

There are pins and needles running through Regulus’s arms and legs, he flexes his fingers and knows they’re starting to go numb.

“I think I’m gonna need to lie down again.”

“Are you okay?”

“Just splinching and a head injury,” his words sound a little slurred as James helps maneuver him back onto his side so he doesn’t have to open his eyes. He hisses as he puts weight on his bottom arm.

“Careful,” James says quietly, and Regulus can tell by the nearness of his voice that he’s crouched down, a second later he feels James’s hand in his hair, pushing the curls off his face. Every part of his body feels like it’s pulsing.

And then there’s a loud crack.

And his fucking head explodes.

“Kreacher, Jesus, I told you—“

“I is sorry! I forget! Master Regulus I is sorry!”

Merlin poor Kreacher.

Is what Regulus thinks.

He’s pretty sure the only thing that comes out of his mouth is a high keening noise.

“Reg, hey, Reg—pain potions, we can’t find them, where—“

“My bathroom,” it comes out a sob. Merlin he’s so fucking tired of being in pain. “Behind the mirror.”

“Got it, got it, Kreacher can you get one—“

“Three.”

“What?”

He can’t answer right away, because he’s pretty sure if he tries he’s going to start throwing up and that’ll hurt like a bitch. So he waits. Waits for the pain to dim just enough that he can—

“Reg?”

“I. Need. Three.”

Silence. He wishes he could open his eyes without wanting to tear his brain from his skull.

“Three,” James repeats. “Regulus that’s too much. I know you’re in pain but—“

“It won’t—less won’t work. Just. Fuck. Please. Listen. Please. Please.”

“Okay,” James says finally, sounding anything but sure. “Okay, Kreacher? Three potions, from behind the mirror in the bathroom—and please, Apparate from a different room.”

“Yes sir. Yes, right away sir.”

A few seconds later there’s a gentle hand on Regulus’s forehead and he whines. Something he would feel embarrassed about if he wasn’t already so fucking gone.

“I know,” James says softly. “I know. We’re going to get the pain potion and then I’m going to fix you up okay?”

Regulus can’t really respond but James doesn’t seem to expect him to.

He focuses on his hand again, the weight of it on his skin. The familiarity of its touch even after all this time.

Inhale.

Exhale.

In the end, he doesn’t stay conscious long enough for the potion.

The next time he opens his eyes he almost cries with relief. The stabbing pain in his brain has gone, leaving behind a faint ache. He blinks up at the ceiling for a few minutes, letting the world reform around him. He’s in a bed this time, not on a table. His bed to be exact. His body sore and tired, but at least he doesn’t feel like he’s being torn apart. He prods at the bandages on his arms and when he brings his hand up to his nose he smells Dittany.

Smart.

Most people wouldn’t think to apply it directly to the wounds, but the prolonged exposure will likely give it a chance to work on the deeper cuts in a way it wouldn’t have if just ingested.

“You’re awake.”

He starts, head snapping towards the voice and instantly regretting it. Not quite healed enough for fast movements. He grimaces, closing his eyes for a minute as his brain settles. When he opens them again he’s met with the sight of James Potter, sitting in a chair across from his bed, elbows on his knees, something in his hands.

“You’re here,” Regulus says stupidly, because it’s no less shocking now than it was the first time. He had been more than willing to write it off as some sort of delusion. That would honestly make more sense to him than James Potter actually being in his house.

Kreacher went and got him.

Told him you needed help.

And he came.

After everything he—

“Three potions,” James’s voices cuts off Regulus’s thoughts.

Something is...wrong.

Regulus pushes himself up to sit against the headboard, pillows supporting his lower back. It's a clumsy process that takes far too long but he's not about to have this conversation lying down.

James isn't looking at him, eyes trained instead on the thing in his hands, which Regulus can now see is a potion bottle.

"Three potions is way too much, and I couldn't figure out why you thought you needed it," James says, voice carefully blank. "You of all people know how these potions work. How potent they are. How powerful." He passes the little vial back and forth between his palms, tension hanging heavy in the room. Regulus can practically see it curving around James's shoulders, down his rigid spine, into the tight way he's holding his mouth. There's something dangerous about it. Regulus feels like he's standing on the edge of a cliff just waiting to be pushed off.

"James—"

"This isn't a pain potion," he holds up the vial, looking at Regulus for the first time. "I didn't realize it when Kreacher first brought them down. I was too busy freaking out. But once I had you stable I realized...this isn't a pain potion."

Regulus just watches him, not sure where this is going. I mean, okay, maybe he knows a little bit where this is going, but he's not sure why James seems so...angry. He isn't yelling, but everything about the way he's holding himself feels like rage.

"There are a ton of these behind that mirror, at least two dozen. Unlabelled. And way more of them empty under the sink."

"James—"

"I'm not going to pretend I know what's in this," James presses on, voice starting to shake ever so slightly. "But I'm going to take a wild guess that it has nothing to do with pain management."

Shows what you know,

is the first thing Regulus thinks, though it doesn't quite make it past his lips. A long moment of silence stretches between them before either of them speaks again.

"So what."

James blinks. "So what?"

"Yeah, so what. What the fuck does any of this have to do with you?"

James just stares at him, everything in his eyes so...so big. That's the only way Regulus can think to describe it. Holding his stare feels impossible. There's too much of it. Regulus isn't enough to take it all.

Eventually James laughs. It's a cold sound, sending chills down Regulus's spine. He gets out of his chair and for a second Regulus thinks he might just walk out. After everything. All this time. He might just leave. Again.

But he doesn't.

"Everything you did—" James starts and then stops, taking a deep breath. "Everything you let THEM do. To Sirius, to Mary, to you. You justified by saying you didn't want to die. And I fucking fell for it."

Regulus feels his brows draw together. "What are you talking about?" But James is barely listening to him.

"I thought—I thought," his voice breaks and Regulus thinks there might be tears in his eyes. "I thought, he's so scared. He's so scared. He really thinks they're going to kill him. And he doesn't have anyone—anywhere safe. And I wanted to be that somewhere safe for you Reg. I wanted to be it so bad because I thought—I thought if I could, then you—you would see that you didn't have to do this. That there was another way," he runs a hand over his face, maybe he's wiping away tears Regulus doesn't know. "I felt fucking bad for you. I felt so fucking bad for you and it was all bullshit."

"The hell it was!" Regulus snaps before he can stop himself.

"I thought you were scared, I thought you did it all because you were scared."

"I WAS scared!"

"Then what the hell is this Regulus?" He holds up the glass vial, and now he is yelling. His voice shaking Regulus's chest, making his eyes prickle. It isn't just because he's being yelled at. It's James. It's the look in his eyes, his voice cracking on the way out of his mouth. He's hurt. Somehow Regulus has managed to hurt him again and he doesn't even know how.

"What the hell is this?" James goes on. "You justified every horrible fucking thing you did by saying you were afraid of dying—it's Voldemort or death that's what you said. So you had to get the Mark. Had to stay here in this goddamn house. Had to leave me—"

"YOU left me!"

"BULLSHIT!" James's face is red, his chest heaving. "That's bullshit Reg and you know it! You left, the minute you got that fucking snake on your arm. You gave up everything because you wanted to live and I thought you were wrong, I thought you were wrong but I still understood. Because dying is a scary thing. But after all of that, all of the pain you caused so that you could survive, here you are KILLING YOUR FUCKING SELF."

He throws the potion bottle across the room, the glass smashing against the wall making Regulus flinch. There's buzzing in his ears, James's voice still hanging in the air. Ugly and mean and maybe honest. And maybe true. But there's a cruelty in telling the truth, something James has never understood.

“So was it worth it?” James asks, voice ragged. “Huh? Letting them torture Sirius? Attack Mary—“

“I saved Macdonald!” Regulus snaps, because he’s had just about a goddamn enough of James’s sermonizing.

James looks at him oddly. “Is that what you think?”

Regulus fists the comforter, glaring at him. “Yes.”

There’s a moment of hesitation, like he doesn’t know whether or not he should keep going, but in the end, James Potter has never excelled at self-restraint. “One of these days you’re going to have to come to terms with the fact, that what you did to her is exactly what your family did to you when they pretended they couldn’t see what Lucius was up to.”

And oh.

Oh.

Oh.

Regulus has to resist the urge to wrap his arms around himself. To protect himself from those words. A profound silence settling over the room. His mind twitches, threatening to let it all go. To open every box in every corner and let it all come spilling out. Every horrible feeling. Every moment he screamed and no one came.

“Is exactly what your father did,” James goes on, because apparently he still has more to say. Apparently that wasn’t enough. “When he left you and Sirius at the mercy of your mother.”

Regulus is shaking so badly he’s not sure he’ll be able to speak. He’s so fucking angry. And something else. Something he can’t name. Something that sits heavy behind his ribs and threatens to break him.

“Yeah well,” he manages eventually, impressed by how empty his voice is, “that’s what people do.”

He gets some satisfaction out of the way James reels back at that. “What?”

“I’ve told you before, we can’t all be heroes, some of us just have to be people. And people do whatever the fuck they need to to get through the day. Good or bad, wrong or right, none of it matters in the end,” it’s work to keep his teeth from chattering, to make his words come out clearly. “All the pain I’ve been through? It never made me strong or brave, it just made me so goddamn sure that I didn’t want to feel it again. So yeah, I shoved everyone I could in front of me, used them to protect myself. And I would do it again. Maybe that makes me a coward. Maybe that makes me a villain. I honestly don’t care at this point. I just don’t want to fucking hurt anymore.”

He holds onto his anger with trembling hands, holds it up as a shield and hides behind it. Ignoring everything else that James’s words have done. Every way they’ve twisted him up. Ignores the weight in his chest. Ignores the boxes threatening to unlock themselves.

He will not feel this.

He won't.

He's not strong enough,

He never was.

James is different though. The rage that had been wafting off him a few minutes ago has transformed into something else, something more complicated. And that pisses Regulus off. Because he started this, he doesn't get to look like that now. Doesn't get to look heartbroken.

"I want my wand," Regulus finally says, when the silence becomes just a little too much.

James arches his brow. "You going to curse me?"

"Thinking about it," Regulus says flatly. "Where's my fucking wand Potter?"

"Oh so it's Potter now?"

"Damn right it's Potter, you think you can just say—" but his voice cuts out, hands shaking as he runs them through his hair. "I want my wand. Krea—"

"You don't need to call him," James walks over to Regulus's desk, picking up his wand and waving it at him. "I brought it up."

Regulus doesn't say anything just holds out his hand. He feels naked without it. Disadvantaged. Well, more disadvantaged than he already is—being injured and barely able to sit up on his own. James hands the wand over, handle first, and then pauses, the tip pressed to his stomach. Regulus's eyes find the point of contact and then flick up to James's face, seeing the challenge in his gaze.

He doesn't need to say "I dare you" Regulus can hear it loud and clear.

He rips his wand away from James's stomach and James takes a step back but doesn't go far. Regulus really isn't planning on using it. He just wants to have it, wants to show James he isn't some weak quivering mess, wants the comforting weight in his hand.

He really isn't planning to use it.

But.

Well.

He flicks it without thinking. Barely even noticing. Mind focused on whether or not he wants to kick James Potter out of his fucking house (the answer is no, but he's loathed to admit it). He's so used to Boo randomly appearing that he doesn't even bother acknowledging him when he slips out.

But James goes stiff.

“Relax, it’s just a Patronus, it’s not going to do anything to you,” he mutters irritably, wondering if James really thinks he would curse him. But the other boy still doesn’t move, eyes wide as he watches the ghostly figure walk towards him.

“James?” Regulus says, not understanding why he’s acting like he’s never seen a Patronus before. “He’s not going to hurt you,” and when he still doesn’t get a response; “Look I’ll get rid of him okay?”

“No don’t—“ James’s voice is strained as he holds up his hand, stopping Regulus half-way through the incantation. He’s still watching Boo like he can’t tear his eyes away. And then, without warning, he pulls his own wand out of his back pocket.

“James—“

“Expecto-Patronum,” the spell comes out of his mouth a little shakily and there’s a burst of bright light. A second later a stag appears. He gallops across Regulus’s bed before running up to Boo, the pair turning to look at one another. They aren’t identical. Boo is a little bit shorter, his antlers different, his neck thicker. But—but—

“They match,” Regulus says breathlessly, watching Boo move forward, watching him duck his head down, pressing into the other stag’s chest, who curves around him like—like they’re holding one another.

James sits down on the end of the bed, seemingly in a similar state of awe. Eventually Boo pulls away and the pair starts chasing one another, two bright blurs of motion circling the room. Playing.

It’s beautiful.

After a few moments Regulus finally manages to make himself speak. “It doesn’t mean anything.”

“Doesn’t mean anything,” James repeats numbly, neither of them looking away from the bright lights in front of them. Regulus doesn’t know if stags can actually smile, but he’s pretty sure Boo is.

“If that’s—if you’re freaking out because your Patronus matches a...Death Eater’s,” he says the words derisively, “if you think that says something about you, it doesn’t. Okay?”

“Because it doesn’t mean anything,” James says again, in that same flat voice. And then he laughs, dropping his face into hands. “You really believe that Reg?”

And Regulus tries to answer but his throat has grown too tight, watching as Boo playfully butts his antlers against the other stag’s. Yes, he wants to say.

It doesn’t matter.

It doesn’t mean anything.

Lets both move on.

Like we should have done years ago.

Should have done after the first kiss.

Yes. I believe that. Believe all of it.

But he can't quite make the words come out of his mouth.

"You really think I would be here if you didn't mean—" James's voice breaks and he takes a deep breath, letting his hands fall away from his face as he sits back up. "If you didn't mean anything to me?"

The two stags are slowly moving around one another. In awe. In reverence. Sometimes they brush up against each other—their noses, their foreheads. Regulus is always telling Cerci that Boo isn't real, just an incantation. But that's never been harder to believe than it is right now. Watching him with James's stag. The way his eyes follow him, the way he fits himself so perfectly at his side.

Regulus has to close his eyes because it's too much. James has always been able to make him lose control. He feels the weight in his chest starting to crack his ribs, everything inside of him pushing and pushing with nowhere to go.

He'd thought they were some freak accident. That a mistake had been made. James Potter and Regulus Black were never meant to speak. Never meant to grow close. Never meant to fall in love. That is not how the story goes. It was inevitable that fate would course correct. That they would be forced back onto the paths they were always supposed to travel, completely separate from one another.

And yet.

And yet they match.

In the most intimate way two wizards possibly can.

And how can that be? How can that be if they were doomed from the start?

"No," Regulus finally manages, voice strangled, eyes still closed.

He thinks he hears James turn towards him. "No?"

"No I don't really believe it's meaningless," and then, before he can stop himself, before he can slam the lid on that box closed: "No it wasn't worth it. None of it was worth it."

And that's the truth that breaks him.

That he was wrong.

That he'd dug himself into a hole he couldn't get out of, and instead of trying, of asking for help, he just kept digging.

He gulps at the air, his knees coming up as he drops his head between them.

“I thought I knew what I was doing,” he says desperately, barely able to get the words out. “But I’m so fucking lost. I’m so empty.”

All of that fighting.

All of that struggle.

And where had it got him?

“Reg?” James must have moved because he sounds closer, but Regulus can’t look, hands clutching the back of his head, nails digging into his skull.

“I did it all wrong.”

It had always been about surviving, his childhood, about knowing what to say and how to act to keep his mother happy. To keep himself safe.

“I did it all wrong.”

He got so used to it. To just trying to figure out how to make it through. That was all that mattered. All that had ever mattered. The only way to measure success. Nothing was worse than death, so everything that helped him escape it was justified.

“I did it all wrong.”

Standing in the Come and Go Room, James had said “what’s the point in living just to become monsters ourselves” and Regulus had thought that was so stupid. Because what is the point of anything if you aren’t alive?

But he’s alive now.

He’s alive now and nothing matters.

And none of it was worth it.

“I did it all wrong.”

And it’s too late. Not even twenty years old and it already feels too late for him. How can you fix a life that was rotten to begin with?

“Regulus,” James says softly, the mattress dips as he slides next to him, wrapping his arms around him and pulling him into his chest. Somehow they end up lying down, and James is so careful, touches skating over Regulus’s cheek, the back of his neck, his arms, his wrists. Like he’s trying to ease the pain out of every part of Regulus’s body. Trying to hold all of him at once.

It makes Regulus ache.

“Breathe Reg,” he says quietly. “I’ve got you. Just breathe.”

He remembers when he had this. When he had this all the time. And you couldn’t say he took it for granted because he never did. Always knew it was a fucking gift. But somehow he’d been able to convince himself that he could live without it.

He isn’t sure he’s strong enough to do that again.

“I don’t know how to do this,” words muffled by James’s chest.

“Do what?”

“All of it,” get up. Move. Think. Eat. “I’m so tired. I’m so tired of being here.”

He thinks he hears James’s breath hitch. Thinks he feels it. James’s arms tightening around him. He buries his face in Regulus’s hair.

“I don’t know how to do this either.”

Regulus isn’t sure if they’re talking about the same thing.

He hopes not.

James runs his hand slowly up and down Regulus’s spine, touch feather light around his wounds, fingers outlining all the notches of his spine.

“You’re so thin Reg,” James sounds wounded when he says it.

“I’m okay,” it’s an automatic response, completely contradicting everything he’s just said.

“Doesn’t that pain in the ass house elf of yours feed you?”

Regulus snorts. “He tries.”

He can feel James shaking his head, letting out a trembling breath. “You’re kind of breaking my heart here Regulus.”

Regulus burrows a little further into James’s warmth. “Sorry.” And that’s when he feels it. Something...hard?

Regulus pulls back, though James is very reluctant to allow him to do so.

“Potter—“

“Oh my god we’re so not doing this again!”

But Regulus ignores him “—what the hell is in your pocket?”

James blinks and then looks down. “Oh.”

They both sit up, legs crossed, facing one another, blankets pooling around Regulus's waist. He's slower in his movements than James and he sees the other boy watching him nervously, but he's not about to ask for help to sit, Jesus Christ.

"Well?" he huffs, when he's finally settled.

James actually looks a little embarrassed, colour spreading over the tops of his cheeks as he rubs the back of his neck. Something about it is so familiar that it makes Regulus want to reach out and just—touch the moment.

Stay here.

Like this.

Just as I remember you.

Of course, James isn't exactly how he remembers him.

There's a new heaviness in his eyes. His shoulders. He's angrier than he used to be. But now, like this, in this moment, he could be sixteen again. And it makes every inch of Regulus just...want.

"I don't know why I even brought it," James blurts out, like he's starting in the middle of his thought. "I saw it the other day so I guess I was thinking about it and then Kreacher showed up and—I don't know, I was sort of in shock and my brain just—" he looks sheepish. "I didn't realize quite how serious things were. Should have but..."

"James," Regulus knocks their knees together, "just show me what it is."

James arches his brow. "Oh so it's James again is it?"

Regulus rolls his eyes—which still hurts his head a bit but he thinks he manages to keep the grimace off his face. "You're stalling."

James laughs nervously. "Yeah, yeah might be." He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a small black velvet box. Regulus just stares at it for a minute before his eyes flick back up to James's. He smiles a little self-consciously. "Merry Christmas."

Regulus blinks. "What?"

"Told you I would get you a gift."

"You—oh." His eyes drop back to the box.

"Few years late, but I never really got the chance before so...well, take it," he holds it out to him. It's another few seconds before Regulus does as he's told, carefully taking it in the palm of his hand, like he's afraid any second it'll crumble out of existence.

He looks over at James, brow arched. "You were going to propose?"

“Oh fuck off. Just open it, asshole.”

Regulus’s mouth twitches upwards as he lifts the lid to reveal what looks like some kind of old-timey pocket watch—round, larger than a necklace, and on a chain made of gold, the front carved in elegant detail. Regulus stares at it for a minute before looking back at James, biting his lower lip.

“It’s beautiful but I don’t—“

“Open it,” James nudges his knee.

Regulus gently takes the gift out of its box, clicking it open. He’s expecting—well, he doesn’t know what he’s expecting, but it isn’t what he finds. It’s more a locket than a watch, except instead of portraits inside there are two tiny windows of the night sky. The stars blinking back at him, the glow of the moon lighting up his thumb.

It’s beautiful magic. Spring, Regulus thinks, closing his eyes for a moment. James’s magic has always felt like spring—soft and warm and gentle. Maybe a little sweet. Eventually he forces his eyes open again, finding a slightly nervous James in front of him.

“I do alright then?” he asks.

And Regulus isn’t quite sure how to make all the feelings in his chest into words. “You gave me the stars.”

James nods. “Can you see them all? Is it clear? See there’s—that’s Sirius,” he leans forward, pointing to one side of the locket. “And there’s Regulus,” James’s eyes pop up for a minute. “Regulus is the heart of the Lion constellation, did you know?”

Regulus can’t help the smile that pulls at his mouth. He has a feeling it’s embarrassingly soft. “Yeah,” he manages, voice a bit rough. “Yeah I know.”

“And then,” James moves onto the last grouping of tiny twinkling stars, “that’s Orion.”

He pulls back, looking up at Regulus who is still struggling to speak. “I just thought...this way you wouldn’t have to go up to the astronomy tower to see them. You could carry them with you. Talk to them whenever you wanted.”

And what is he supposed to say to that? He tries to swallow but his throat is too tight and too dry, unable to bare the sweetness in James’s eyes. The silence stretches on long enough that James starts to look concerned.

“Reg?”

“Sorry,” he croaks, before coughing to clear his throat. “Sorry, it’s—thank you, I—“ but he doesn’t know how to say it. How to say what this means. So instead he leans forward, burying his face in James’s neck.

“Hey,” James says softly, his hand gentle on the back of Regulus’s head, his other on his waist. Regulus breathes him in and feels the ache of dozens of memories. Hundreds of

moments. He'd wanted to protect James from him. He'd wanted to protect him so badly. But he's too tired now, can't manage to push him away. Now he just wants him.

"Can I ask you something?" James says after a few moments, chin resting on Regulus's head.

"Yeah."

There's a pause, James clearly thinking through what he wants to say. "I went back to Hogwarts a little while ago."

"I'm sure they threw a parade."

James snorts. "Not quite. But I—I went back to our room."

Our room.

Something about the way he says it makes Regulus's chest feel warm.

James is quiet again, his fingers playing with the hair at the nape of Regulus's neck and Regulus shamelessly lets himself fall a little further into James's lap. When he turns his head, cheek pressed to James's chest, he sees the two stags on the floor, curled around each other, almost mimicking them.

"I found our initials," James says finally.

Regulus blinks, trying to focus. "Huh?"

"Carved into the wall behind the mirror," he explains. "I found our initials. Did you—did you do that?"

Regulus huffs. "That's a stupid question."

"Reg—"

"Of course I did it. Who else do you think it was? The fucking Bloody Baron?"

"I don't know, it could've just been the room. It's—it's kind of like that, you know? And there were those other initials above it so I thought, maybe it was just a thing the room did."

Regulus rolls his eyes, which isn't worth it because it hurts his head and James can't even see him. "Well no, it wasn't magical room voodoo."

There's another pause before James says, "Okay," voice soft as Regulus feels him tilt his head down, like maybe he's kissing him. Regulus is going to pretend that he does even if it isn't true. Is going to pretend that kissing is still a thing they do. The only time he's ever liked his skin is when James Potter was kissing it.

And then suddenly Regulus is speaking; "I saw those other initials and I thought—this is at least as much our room as it is their's."

James huffs out a laugh. “You got jealous of initials?”

“Carved into the wall of OUR room.”

That earns him another laugh and a thumb rubbing circles into the back of his neck “Who do you think they were?” James asks eventually.

Regulus shakes his head. “Students?”

“Yeah...might be.”

Regulus waits for him to say more and when he doesn't: “Are you trying to figure out who you know with the initials S and G?”

“...Maybe.”

Regulus can hear the smile in his voice.

“Who've you come up with then?”

“Well, there's Sirius and the Giant Squid.”

Regulus laughs, nuzzling at James's chest. “A valid option.”

“Or Snape and the Giant Squid.”

“A more likely pair.”

“I thought so too.”

“Tell me, do all the couples you can come up with involve a sea monster?”

“Oi!” James says indignantly, pinching Regulus's side and making him squirm. “The squid is not a monster, thank you very much. And you try to come up with potential G's, it's not easy. Did we go to school with a George?”

Regulus stifles a laugh. “Probably? But we definitely went to school with a Gilderoy.”

James makes a dismissive noise. “Please, if it was Gilderoy the initials would have been G&G.”

“Fair point,” Regulus has to bite the inside of his cheek to keep his smile in check.

“I'm gonna stick with George.”

“The George we may or may not have gone to school with?”

“Exactly.”

“Is George really the only G name you can think of?”

“Well what other ones are there!” James demands indignantly, before tilting his head back and looking up into his skull like that’ll help. “George, George, George,” he repeats to himself. “Georgie, Gordie, Gord, God—oi!” James snaps his fingers, head dropping back down. “I’ve got it.”

James’s Patronus raises his head at the sudden commotion.

“Have you?” Regulus asks amused.

“It’s Godric.”

“Godric?” Regulus repeats, genuinely confused. And then; “As in, Godric Gryffindor?”

“Mhmm,” James says shamelessly.

“Godric and who?”

James blows out a breath as though the answer is obvious. “Salazar.”

There’s a beat of silence.

And then Regulus starts to laugh. “That’s fucking unhinged Potter.”

“Oh my god. Stop. Calling. Me. Potter,” he tickles Regulus’s sides which has him squirming and cackling hands nearly hitting James in the face.

“F-fuck y-you,” he gets out between giggles. “I’m fucking i-injured!”

“Oh yeah,” James stops, hands gripping Regulus’s waist, steadying him. Regulus is panting, and smiling—fuck when was the last time he smiled this much?—the jewellery box lost in the sheets so that both his hands can brace themselves against James’s shoulders. When he lifts his head their noses brush. And James is right there, for the first time in years, big and bright and making Regulus’s breath catch. Swallowing him.

James’s eyes flutter closed, almost like he’s in pain. “Regulus…”

“What?” They’re whispering again.

James shakes his head, but his expression is so sad that Regulus’s hands come up, cradling his face.

“What is it?” he asks again.

James lets out a shaky breath, “Tsunami.”

Regulus doesn’t understand and James doesn’t seem able to explain.

He’s so beautiful,

Regulus thinks,

he's so beautiful,
and he loves him,
loves him,
loves him.

Regulus can't help himself. He kisses James's cheek, the other boy's eyes staying closed even as his breath hitches. Regulus kisses his temple, his nose, along the line of his jaw.

"Regulus—"

"I know, I know."

"I can't."

"Shh," and finally he presses their mouths together. James tastes like home. Soft and lovely and sweet.

"Please," Regulus whispers against him, meaning it with every fibre of his being. Which isn't fair. Not at all. Because he knows James Potter. Knows all he's ever wanted is to be needed.

A pained noise comes from the back of James's throat and then his mouth opens and Regulus swears the world stops spinning. Everything shrinking down to the feeling of James's tongue in his mouth, fireworks exploding behind Regulus's eyes.

James's hands slip under his shirt and up his sides, careful of his wounds, making Regulus shiver. His thighs have somehow ended up bracketing James's hips, pressing their chests together, both of them shaking. James sucks on Regulus's lower lip and he lets out an embarrassingly loud moan. He'd forgotten that he could feel this way, that he was even physically capable of it. That James could make him feel this way.

"Reg," James tries to pull back and kiss him at the same time, like his mind and body are on two different tracks. Regulus mouths at James's jaw, feeling the faint scrape of stubble there. He keeps going, making his way down James's neck, pausing at the point between his neck and his shoulder. Licking and biting and

kissing,

kissing

kissing.

"Fuck," James groans, and then his hands are tugging at Reg, pulling his face up, and Regulus thinks he's bringing their mouths back together but instead James presses his forehead to Regulus's, breath heavy, eyes squeezing shut.

"Please, please I can't do this."

And for a minute a sickening feeling rocks through Regulus. “I’m sorry,” he’d gotten carried away, “I didn’t mean to—”

Regulus tries to pull back but James doesn’t let him. “Hey, hey, it’s okay, it’s okay,” though his voice trembles “That’s not what I meant I just—I’m with Lily.”

Regulus swallows, the two of them still pressed together, James’s hand on the back of his neck. Grounding, reassuring, even though it’s clear James himself is feeling neither of those things. “I know.”

James lets out a huff of laughter that Regulus feels against his cheek. “Oh,” and then James’s face crumples and Regulus can’t help reaching out and trying to smooth the lines.

“Don’t look like that, it’s okay.”

James lets out a shaky breath. “It isn’t,” he whispers. “You deserve better.”

Which Regulus knows isn’t true. Is about to tell him as much before he speaks again:

“Lily deserves better.”

Well...he won’t argue with that one. It’s not his place.

Silence falls over them, James’s hand squeezing the back of Regulus’s neck. It’s a long time before James speaks again.

“She’s pregnant.”

Regulus blinks.

“Who’s pregnant?”

“Lily.”

This time, when Regulus pulls away, James lets him. Well, sort of. Regulus is still sitting in James’s lap, still has his arms around him. James’s eyes open again, wide and pleading, like he’s done something wrong.

“That’s—” he hadn’t been expecting that, his mind struggling to catch up. “That’s—that’s good,” he cringes at the crack in his voice.

James looks a little startled. “Yeah?”

Regulus nods, trying to breathe through the small spike of pain in his chest. “I’m happy for you,” it’s not as hard to say as he thought it would be.

“You almost sound like you mean that.”

“I do mean it.”

James gives him an odd look, uncertain and nervous. Which is when it really hits Regulus that James cares what he thinks. “Really?” James asks timidly.

“Really,” and then, because he can’t help it, he leans forward and kisses the top of James’s head. Quick. And chaste. Not trying to...start anything, just trying to...reassure. “That kid is going to be...so...loved.”

Something flickers across James’s face that Regulus can’t quite figure out.

“I hope so,” he whispers when he finally speaks. “I want to be a good dad.”

“You will be,” Regulus says without hesitating, because he means it. Because it’s obvious to anyone who’s spent more than ten minutes with James that he was made for fatherhood. “You’ve already raised Sirius, I can’t imagine any kid is going to be more hassle than that.”

James laughs, though it’s a little wet, a little sad, his eyes soft as he stares at Regulus for a minute before bringing their foreheads back together. “Thank you,” he says. Regulus isn’t sure what he’s being thanked for but he’ll take it, even if thinking about James and Lily and their baby makes his heart twinge.

“You’re happy then?” he asks after a moment. “About it?”

James lets out a breath, pulling away, much to Regulus’s displeasure, though there is something nostalgic about watching him tangle his fingers in his hair, making it a bigger mess than it was already. “Yeah, yeah I am. Bit freaked out, obviously.”

“Obviously,” Regulus agrees, with the smallest twitch of his lips.

“But...I’ve always wanted kids you know? Maybe not right now, but...”

“Wasn’t planned then?”

James narrows his eyes. “Listen, I already got the safe-sex lecture from your brother okay?”

“Clearly he didn’t do a very good job.”

“Oh fuck off,” James reaches over to pinch his side but Regulus slaps his hand away.

“Oi! Still injured!”

James rolls his eyes, but he can’t quite hold back his smile. “Fine. And no, no it wasn’t planned. Only found out a few weeks ago, honestly it’s still kinda doing my head in.”

Something snags in Regulus’s brain. “A few weeks ago? How many weeks?”

The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches

“Er—dunno two? Three? God, maybe it’s been a month. I should probably be keeping track.”

Born to those who have thrice defied him

There's a buzzing in Regulus's head. Like a warning. "When is it due?"

"What?" James looks genuinely confused.

Born as the seventh month dies

"The baby. When is it due?"

"Um," James looks up, thinking. "I guess it would be...July?"

"You guess or you know?" Regulus demands, the buzzing growing louder, filling his ears.

"Shit Reg, I don't know. Does it matter?"

"Who have you told?" Regulus reaches out, hands gripping James's arms. "Who else knows?"

James is looking genuinely concerned now, but for all the wrong reasons. "Reg, what's going on here? Why are you freaking out about this?"

Regulus takes in a deep breath, trying to steady himself. He doesn't want to scare James. It won't do any good. He's not even sure—I mean, it could be a coincidence...right?

"You have to be careful who you tell things to these days," Regulus finally manages, fully aware of the irony, since he is the last person James Potter should be telling anything to.

James lets out a bemused laugh. "It's a baby not a weapon."

Regulus does his best not to grimace. "So people know then?"

"I mean, we haven't taken out a skywriter or anything, but it's not a secret."

Regulus nods. That means there's a good chance that whoever Voldemort's informant is, they know. And eventually Voldemort is going to ask for that information. Regulus would imagine sooner rather than later.

"Hey?" James ducks his head, trying to get Regulus's attention. "You wanna tell me what—"

He's cut off as the whole house shakes, a distant thumping noise echoing through the halls—like banging on a fish tank. And suddenly alarm bells are going off in Regulus's head for an entirely different reason.

"The wards," he hisses, eyes wide. "Someone's trying to get through the wards."

Both Patronuses are on their feet, standing at attention, heads held high.

"You have to go," Regulus says desperately, turning back to James. "You have to go now."

He grabs hold of James's wrist as the house shakes again. He doesn't know how long the wards will last under pressure but he's not taking any chances.

“Woah hey, careful, you’re hurt,” James says as Regulus scrambles off the bed, dragging James with him. His back and arms twinge, head a little light, but he doesn’t care. He pulls James out of the room and down the stairs.

“I’ll open the Floo,” he explains without stopping, without taking a minute to breathe, “just long enough for you to go through,” they stumble onto the main floor. “Then close it again. It shouldn’t be enough time for anyone else to get in.”

“Shouldn’t?”

Regulus grimaces but doesn’t comment. He’s been selfish, he knows that. He should have made James leave before now. Should have made him leave the moment he was conscious again.

“Okay,” he pants as they reach the fireplace, his hand gripping the mantle, ignoring the curious faces of the little painted boys above. “I’ll open it now and you can—“

“Wait—Jesus Regulus, breathe okay? It’ll take them a minute to get through the wards.”

“You don’t know that!” he snaps, voice cracking. Because if it’s Lucius, or Bellatrix, or god, fucking Voldemort himself, and they get their hands on James—the thought alone makes Regulus feel sick.

“Please,” he says as James steps into his space, hands cupping his face. “Please, I just want you to be safe.”

But James is apparently in no hurry, not caring at all for Regulus’s nerves. The fucking bastard. Instead he just stands there, staring, like he hasn’t had his fill yet.

“Come with me.”

Regulus blinks. Feeling like he’s been thrown back in time.

“What?”

“Come with me.”

This just feels mean. “Go. James.”

“Reg—“

But he pulls away, out of James’s reach, taking a few steps in the opposite direction before turning back. “You’re with Lily Evans.”

James’s face is serious. “Yes.”

“You’re having a baby with her.”

“Yes.”

Regulus laughs humourlessly as the house trembles again. The painting above the mantle threatening to fall.

“So—so what? Are you trying to tell me you’re going to leave her?”

James pauses for a moment before slowly shaking his head. “No.”

“Because of the baby?”

“Because I love her.”

That shouldn’t be so hard to hear. Regulus already knew it was true, but he still finds himself reacting as if physically struck.

“Fuck off Potter.”

“Regulus—“ he steps forward, arms outstretched, but Regulus stops him with a look.

“I’m not your fucking charity project. I don’t need your goddamn pity.”

James growls, clearly frustrated. “That’s not why I’m asking.”

“Sure it is,” Regulus sneers. “You want me to come with you because leaving me behind would be the wrong thing to do, and James Potter never does the wrong thing. You’re obsessed with playing the hero. That’s all this is.” Maybe it’s all it ever was. That’s a thought Regulus doesn’t particularly want to linger on.

“No.”

“Then why? Why do you want me to come with you?”

James is looking at him desperately. “Because I love you too.”

Regulus feels himself stagger again. Fucking James Potter and his goddamn mouth. Always saying the last thing Regulus wants to hear. The last thing he needs. Making his life more complicated.

For a moment they just stare across the room at one another before Regulus brings his hands up to his face, shoulders sagging in defeat. “I don’t understand what you want from me?” he mutters into his palms.

“I want you to come with me,” James sounds closer and when Regulus drops his hands he sees it’s because he is. Not quite an arms length between them. They could touch if they wanted to.

“And be what? Your mistress?” Honestly he would do it. That’s the pathetic bit. He would do just about anything if it meant that he didn’t have to live without this again. But he isn’t going to say that out loud.

“No,” James says firmly. “No more lying, no more secrets. Not this time. I don’t want to hide.”

Regulus lets out an exasperated laugh. “Then what James? You’re just going to be with both of us?”

His brows draw together. “I don’t know, I-I don’t know, I just...” he shoves his hands into his hair, flustered. “I love you both so much. It’s like I can’t—I can’t be myself without you. I can’t be...whole,” he shakes his head, trying to clear it. “I haven’t figured it out yet, but there has to be...there has to be a way to make this work.”

Regulus snorts. “Does there? I think you’re too used to getting everything you want.”

“Not everything,” James reaches out his hand, slow enough that Regulus could pull away if he wanted to. He doesn’t. “Not yet,” he holds Regulus’s face, thumb brushing his cheek. “C’mon Reg,” he says, in a voice low enough that it makes Regulus’s eyes flutter closed, “spoil me.”

“Christ James,” that isn’t supposed to sound reverent.

“Come with me.”

Regulus chews on his bottom lip, shamelessly pressing into James’s touch. “It’ll fuck your life up.”

“My life’s already fucked.”

After a few more seconds Regulus forces his eyes open, looking seriously at the boy across from him. “So just like that huh, everything’s forgiven? You expect me to believe all that anger from before is just gone?”

Sadness flickers across James’s face. “No,” he says, equally as serious. “Forgiveness takes time. Takes work. I’m asking for that time. Just this once Regulus, don’t give up.”

Regulus wants to argue, but that’s the truth isn’t it? He had given up. Given up on them before they even started. Given up on himself before Sirius ever left him behind. Regulus has lived a life where he never tried, too afraid to be caught caring. Too afraid to hope for more only to have it ripped away.

This is a mental idea, he knows that. Only James potter would think he could love two people without it ending in heartbreak. In devastation. But then again, maybe for him the universe will be generous. He’s the hero of the story after all. Maybe he gets to write his own ending.

It doesn’t matter, Regulus knows, either way it doesn’t matter.

“Okay,” he says finally, watching James’s eyes go wide.

“Yeah?”

Anything for you.

“Yes. I’ll come with you. I’ll come.”

It’s not until that moment, when he hears the weight of the shaking breath that James lets go, when he sees the pain and relief twisting his face, that Regulus realizes how much he’s hurt James. That he realizes how much James has meant it. All of it.

James pulls Regulus into him, bending over to bury his face in Regulus’s hair and Regulus wraps his arms around him as James cries. Does his best not to cry himself—he’s done enough of that today.

“I’m sorry,” he mumbles into James’s chest. And he means for everything, even though he knows there are some things too big for sorry. Some things that cannot be apologized for. The words feel inadequate and awkward as they come out of his mouth, because he knows that he’ll never be sorry enough.

James snuffles, kissing the top of his head as he pulls away, linking their hands together. “C’mon,” he says, offering Regulus a weak smile as he nods towards the fireplace. “lets go home, huh?”

I am home,

he thinks stupidly.

It's always been you.

Regulus squeezes James’s hand. “I can’t come yet,” he says, already wincing at the way it makes the light in James’s eyes flicker.

“Reg—“

“I have to do something,” he tries to explain as the walls around them shake threateningly, the wards protecting them cracking. Some priceless antique shatters somewhere in the house. “It’s important.”

James interrogates his face, looking for something, Regulus doesn’t know what. But he tries to give it to him, tries not to pull his mask on, tries not to hide anything. Not now. Not here.

Finally James nods. “But then you’ll come?”

“I promise.”

There’s a pause, and then the ghost of a smile drifts across James’s face. “I believe you.”

And before he can stop himself Regulus is stepping forward, going up on his toes so that he can reach James’s mouth, trying to pour everything he feels into that kiss. It’s not possible, but he tries.

Dust falls from the ceiling with the next strike against his wards and Regulus pulls away.

“I’ll talk to Lily,” James says breathlessly. “I don’t know—I don’t know how this works Reg but—I’ll talk to her. And I’ll make sure our wards will let you in so when you can—the moment you can—just come. I’m at my parents house do you—“

“I remember the address.”

The one he’d shakily written out in a Muggle post office all those years ago.

Seared in his brain.

James nods, squeezing Regulus’s hand one more time before he steps into the fire, Regulus waving his wand and re-opening the connection.

Their eyes meet.

“I love you Regulus.”

Years disappear and suddenly they’re just two boys facing each other in an empty room.

A do over.

“I love you too.”

James Potter is smiling when the flames pull him away.

After he’s gone it feels like the oxygen has been sucked out of Regulus’s life. Everything dark again.

He waves his wand, closing the Floo connection and leaning against the wall behind him for support. His body is sore, his head aching, and suddenly he feels exhausted. It takes a few moments for him to notice the small glowing light coming from the doorway, and it’s not until Boo is standing right next to him that he realizes what’s causing it.

“I know,” he says wearily, because he’s almost positive Boo is pouting. “We’ll see them again. I promise.”

He thinks he’s telling the truth.

He hopes he is.

It’s then that the house gives another tremendous shuddered, something else crashing to the ground.

“Sir,” Kreacher appears, the shattered pieces of an ugly vase in his hands. “They is be breaking the house! Breaking your mother’s things!”

Regulus isn’t sure that that’s necessarily a bad thing.

“I know,” he says instead. “I’ll let them in.”

The elf’s eyes grow wide. “Is you sure?”

He nods, pushing himself off the wall with a groan. “They’ll only keep trying until they get through anyway.”

He closes his eyes briefly, muttering incantations under his breath and feeling the wards around the house pulse. He’s praying it isn’t Lucius, even though he has a feeling it probably is. He hasn’t got the energy for him right now. Besides, somehow he’ll know, he’ll figure out James was there. He’s always been uncannily good at reading Regulus’s mind.

He feels something give in his chest when the wards drop. There’s a moment of peace, of stillness. And then the front door slams open.

“Regulus!”

He blinks.

“Cerci?”

“Regulus! Regulus are you okay? Reg—“

“I’m here, I’m in here.”

He can hear her feet slamming into the floor as she runs towards his voice, sprinting into the room. “Oh thank god,” she says as she launches herself into his arms, causing them both to stumble backwards.

Regulus winces, “Careful, I’m—a bit fucked up.”

“Sorry,” she mutters into his shoulder, not letting him go.

Kreacher clears his throat. “I will be—er—putting this away sir,” he gestures to the broken vase in his hands, bowing out of the room with a knowing look that has Regulus rolling his eyes. Honestly, he’s worse than Cerci’s mum.

“I was so scared,” she murmurs, his had rubbing her back. He’s a bit awkward, comforting people having never been his forte. “I heard—heard there was some kind of fight at the Ministry. Heard people died. And then your Floo was closed and your wards wouldn’t let me in and I thought—“

“That you’d just blast your way through them?” he asks amused.

“Well I wasn’t about to leave you alone! What if you were dying?!”

Regulus swallows around the lump in his throat. “I’m not dying.”

He tries not to think about lying on the dining room table, bleeding out, screaming. Tries not to think about gentle fingers brushing the backs of his hands. Or holding his face.

“Well I can see that NOW.” But she’s still hugging him, like if she lets go he might disappear.

“Thank you,” Regulus says after a few seconds, “for coming.”

“Of course!”

Something else sits in his mouth, bouncing on its toes, begging to be said. To be asked. It’s dangerous, but the truth is, despite his best efforts, he trusts Cerci. Trusts her completely.

“I’m going to—I need to do something,” he says finally, voice quiet as he watches the doorway over her shoulder for Kreacher. He trusts that elf with a lot but not this. “And I think I’m going to need your help.”

She pulls back for the first time, keeping her hands on his arms, eyes staring up into his face. “Of course, anything. What is it?”

He takes a deep breath, feeling jittery, something between manic excitement and absolute terror.

“I’m going to kill Voldemort.”

He watches her eyes grow wide, the silence in the room deafening. Maybe he made a mistake. Maybe he’s going to have to pull out his wand. But then she speaks.

Hell, she might even be smiling.

“What do you need me to do?”

Chapter End Notes

Hello beautiful people!

For those of you who feel like Evan really got shafted in this chapter I promise he will not be forgotten and Regulus will be dealing with his death in the next chapter!

I hope this felt kind of satisfying to read, I wanted to give them the chance to talk about, like, everything. I don't know if I accomplished that but that was the dream!

As always, I know I am garbage at replying to comments but I do read them and they do mean a lot, I really appreciate all the love and support, we're getting really close to the end now which is honestly wild and making me feel a lil bit sad, but thanks for being here! Hope you're having a good day / night/ morning etc. ect.

Chapter 52

Chapter Summary

There's some cute shit here

Chapter Notes

tw Drug use / addiction (via potions)

tw Alcohol

tw Panic attack

tw ED (idk if this needs to be here because it's a side effect of the potions more than a conscious eating disorder but I just feel like it's being mentioned enough that I wanna throw this out there)

Canon continues to be a loose concept, like she's still around but sometimes we pretend we can't see her, y'know?

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

PART I REGULUS

War is a strange thing. It bends the rules of normal life. Of normal morality. Warps everything to revolve around it. It had never occurred to Regulus that a body could be used as a weapon. He had somewhat assumed that, as a society, they were all agreed that certain things were sacred.

He was wrong.

The Ministry refuses to return the bodies of the dead Death Eaters to their families without a comprehensive list of names detailing everyone who was part of the attempted coup. No one, of course, agrees to supply such a list and so dozens of bodies go unclaimed. Unburied. Unmourned.

And Evan Rosier is one of them.

His mother waits a week before she decides to have a funeral anyway. Dozens of people dressing in black and attending the Rosier home where a large portrait of Evan is suspended

in the middle of the living room, winking and smirking at everyone who walks by. Regulus finds it hard to breathe every time he sees it. Doing his best to avoid it all together.

Somehow he ends up on the stairs with Barty, passing a flask of firewhisky back and forth. They don't talk. There isn't anything to say. There have been speeches all day, from family members, friends. Neither Regulus nor Barty get up. Regulus has no desire to showcase his grief. Besides, he barely recognizes the Evan everyone else is talking about—the perfect son, perfect student, perfect friend—Regulus loved Evan. He really did. But “perfect” is not the word he would use to describe him.

Mrs. Rosier had pleaded with Regulus to tell her about her son's last moments. And so he had, hands shaking in his lap the whole time. He had told her about how well Evan had fought, how he'd saved Regulus, how brave (not idiotic, or delusional, or selfish) he had been to take on Alastor Moody. How he'd almost won. How he'd died quickly and peacefully—though he isn't entirely sure that last one is true. Nothing about that moment had felt peaceful to Regulus.

He did not tell her that he held Evan in his arms. That he let him go. Left him behind.

The thing that hurts most. Well, besides all of it. Is that he doesn't think that Evan would have done it. Left him behind, that is. He never had before.

He's passing the flask silently back to Barty when Cerci appears. He'd lost her sometime after they made it through the line of people offering condolences. He's said “I'm sorry for your loss” so many times today he's not sure he knows what the words mean anymore.

“How're you two holding up?” she asks, her eyes soft, running them over. He isn't sure what they look like. Probably pathetic. He feels pathetic.

Barty holds up his hand, palm down, and wiggles it. Cerci gives him a small smile.

“Fair enough. Why don't we get out of here huh? Go get some food? My treat.”

“There's food here,” Barty says, though he doesn't even sound like he's making an argument, more just stating a fact.

“Yeah, but I feel like you two could benefit from maybe not being here anymore.”

Barty makes a noise that might be a laugh or a scoff, Regulus can't tell. Cerci's eyes finding him, asking a question.

“Reg?”

He holds her gaze for a moment before looking over at the doorway to the living room, just the edge of Evan's portrait visible.

“Yeah,” he says finally, voice rough. “Yeah lets go.”

He isn't paying attention to where Cerci is taking them, doesn't think Barty is either, the pair of them asleep on their feet. Death is one of those things—you have nothing to compare it to

—which makes it very difficult to hold. Evan is dead.

He's dead.

He's dead.

He's dead.

Regulus knows that. Knew it the moment it happened. Saw the empty look in his friend's eyes. But he still...can't quite...grasp what it means.

It's not until Cerci is shoving him into a leather booth after Barty that Regulus realizes they've ended up at the Leaky Cauldron. It's empty mostly, people don't go out much these days, it's not safe.

Because of you, hisses the voice in his head.

He smothers it the best he can. He can only handle so much guilt at once.

“What can I get you folks?”

Regulus blinks up at the overly chipper witch who has just arrived at their table. She smiles at them, pad of paper and QuickQuotes Quill floating beside her head.

“Whisky,” Barty says, voice flat. He's leaning back against the booth, expression as blank as his tone, “lots of it.”

The waitress's smile slips, replaced by confusion—she looks like she's trying to figure out whether or not to take him seriously.

“Just bring us the bottle,” Regulus says, satisfied when he sees the quill finally move.

“Also a pitcher of water please,” Cerci cuts in. “And three burgers with chips.”

When the waitress turns towards her, her face lights up. “Oh my god, Cerci! I didn't even see you there, how are you?”

Cerci's face goes red instantly. “I'm—I'm good—great—well,” she looks quickly at Barty and Regulus and then back at the waitress. “Not great, obviously—just came from a funeral, so, bit sad actually, but also, also...great right now, well, here, cause chips and...you or...stuff,” all of that comes out more or less on the strength of a single breath, leaving Cerci looking rather deflated at the end of it, and panting ever so slightly.

“Oh,” the waitress clearly does not know what to do with any of that. “Well I'm sorry to hear about the funeral...” there is a very awkward pause. “I'll just go get your order shall I? Bottle of whisky, water and three burgers, coming right up,” she offers them a slightly less confident smile than the one she was originally wearing, quickly turning away, clearly glad to escape their table.

“Come here often?” Barty asks flatly.

Cerci rolls her eyes. “It’s the Leaky, everyone comes here often.”

Which Regulus doesn’t think is exactly true—none of the waitresses know his name—but he’s not about to bring that up.

Cerci is staring into the restaurant with an almost longing look on her face, teeth worrying her bottom lip. “I hope she doesn’t forget the chips. Do you think she will? She didn’t mention them at the end but maybe she was just shortening “burgers and chips” to “burgers”, y’know? To save time?” she looks across the table at Regulus. “What do you think?”

Regulus blinks back at her. “I think it’s probably fine.”

Cerci nods but doesn’t look at all convinced, nails tapping on the tabletop. “You know what?” she declares after a few seconds. “I’m just going to go check—can’t have a burger without chips.”

“Apparently,” Regulus watches her get up and head towards the bar. In her absence a more obvious silence settles around him and Barty. It’s thick and stagnant and uncomfortable.

“It doesn’t work without him does it?” Barty asks, not looking at Regulus when he speaks but staring vaguely off into the distance.

“What doesn’t work?” Regulus asks, even though, of course, he knows.

Barty replies by lifting his hand and swirling it between them.

“No,” Regulus agrees after a brief pause, “No it doesn’t.”

Barty just nods. “He was an annoying prick,” which makes Regulus snort. “But I think he was also kind of my favourite person, you know?”

“Yes,” Regulus says too quickly. If it’s possible to mourn someone too quickly. Too needfully. It is undeniable that Evan has left a hole in Regulus’s life. One he carries around with him maybe more than he thought he would.

“Was it really quick?”

Regulus blinks. “What?”

“You told his mum it was quick. Was it really?”

Right to the chest.

Regulus can see it like it’s still happening in front of him. It took a while for all his memories to come back after his head injury, but he has them now.

Evan standing there, grinning, so fucking cocky. So fucking self-assured. Until his back hit the ground.

“Yeah,” Regulus clears his throat. “Yeah it was quick.”

“Avada?”

He nods. “I think so.”

“Good.”

He can’t help but think of Evan’s lifeless eyes. Someone so full of...everything honestly, suddenly just a shell.

Good is not the word Regulus would use.

“Wooph okay,” Cerci says as she walks back towards them, cheeks slightly flushed and a smile on her face that she is clearly trying to hide. “She didn’t forget the chips, and also, I have our drinks!” she’s carrying a bottle in one hand and three glasses in the other.

“Thank fuck,” Barty mutters under his breath, and honestly, Regulus can’t say he disagrees.

“Careful—careful there’s one more step, lift your foot up and...perfect, okay,” Cerci is slightly out of breath as they make it up the stairs, Regulus leaning on her almost completely.

He’s drunk.

Absolutely, out of his head, drunk.

“Wheresbarty?” he slurs, not bothering to leave space between his words.

“We dropped him off at his flat remember?”

“Oh yeah,” he doesn’t, not at all, but he can’t think of any reason Cerci would lie about such a thing.

They stumble into his bedroom, all the lights out, Cerci clumsily spilling Regulus onto the mattress. Not a second later there’s a crack.

“Is Master Regulus injured?” comes a scratchy voice that makes Regulus groan and hold his head. He thinks his hangover is already starting.

“No Kreacher, he’s fine, he’s just...tired...”

“He is looking ill!”

“Mhm, do you think you could be a darling and fetch him a glass of water and a hangover potion if he has any?”

“You is sure he is not being hurt or sick?”

“Positive,” Regulus can’t see Cerci from his position on his back in the middle of his bed, but he’s pretty sure she’s smiling. “But he will be tomorrow morning without that potion.”

There's a pause.

"Ah," Kreacher says finally. "I will be getting it then."

There's another crack and Regulus groans—maybe it's more of a whine but he doesn't want to admit that to himself. And suddenly he's hit with the memory of lying on the dining room table, clutching his head as Kreacher popped in and out of the room.

And James.

And James.

And James.

"He was here," he says before he can stop himself. Too drunk.

"Who was here?"

"He was here in my bed," Merlin what would eleven year old Regulus have thought about that? "And he was so pretty."

Cerci sits down beside him, legs crossing under her skirt. "Regulus," she says slowly, he looks over at her. She seems very big like this—with him on his back. "Do you have a beau?"

He doesn't know how to answer that question. Doesn't want to say no even if it's true. Mostly true. He doesn't know what him and James are—other than a mess. His eyes flutter closed and he says the only thing that feels real in that moment.

"I love him."

"What the heck!" Cerci punches him playfully in the arm and Regulus pouts even though he barely feels it. "Why didn't you tell me! I have to meet him! I have to give him The Talk!"

"The Talk?" Regulus asks, eyebrows raised.

"You know, make sure he's aware that if he hurts you he'll be dealing with me."

"Oh, very scary," Regulus says flatly, prompting Cerci to punch him again. "Ow!—okay, point taken."

She smiles.

"Anyway, you can't talk to him, he left." It's an effort to make the words come out fully formed.

"Left, like, forever?"

"He just left."

Regulus sighs, staring up at the ceiling.

“I’m so tired of being left behind,” he says eventually, voice small, “even if it’s my fault.”

“Aw, Reg no. You’re not being left behind. I’m here, right?”

He looks at her again, trying to return her smile. “Yeah, yeah you are,” he manages eventually.

A few moments pass and Regulus has started to drift a bit when Cerci says: “We’re not—er—talking about Evan right? That’s not who you’re in love with?”

That makes Regulus laugh, it’s a giggly-snorty sound, juvenile and unbecoming. “Merlin no. He’ll love that though, the idea of me being secretly in love him.” And then Regulus feels something in his chest catch. “He would have loved it,” he corrects himself, the sudden hot pressure of tears behind his eyes. Merlin he hates being drunk. He brings his hands up to his face, hiding it.

“Fuck,” he hisses, voice shaking. “I miss him so much.”

“I know,” Cerci says softly.

“I’m going to miss him forever.”

“Probably. But that’s a good thing.”

Regulus lets out a wet laugh before dropping his hands. “How could that possibly be a good thing?”

Cerci shrugs, tucking her hair behind her ear. Regulus can’t really see her face in the dark so he’s not exactly sure what her expression is. “That’s kind of the most meaningful way to remember someone—missing them. It means they mattered. It means you loved them. Those are good things.”

Regulus is feeling a little blurry so it takes a moment for that to really sink in, but when it does, something in his chest eases a little. “Thank you,” he says finally, voice rough. “That—that helps.”

And he thinks maybe he really means it.

Regulus does not remember Kreacher coming back. Or falling asleep for that matter. Regardless, he wakes up the next morning tucked into bed with a glass of water and a hangover potion sitting beside him on the table. With some effort he’s able to sit, mouth stale and dry, head pounding. He swings his legs over the side of the bed and then pauses, waiting for the spins to cease and his stomach to stop threatening to purge itself. And then he reaches for the potion.

It’s barely down his throat and he already starts to feel relief, a cool sensation wafting over him, like a damp cloth has been placed on his forehead. He chugs the water and stands, walking into the bathroom. He feels more human after a shower and brushing his teeth, fixing

his hair in the mirror before his hand reaches out—instinct, habit—he freezes when he realizes what he’s doing, suddenly caught staring at his own reflection.

after all of that,

James’s voice rings loud in his head.

All of the pain you caused so that you could survive, here you are KILLING YOUR FUCKING SELF.

He keeps staring at his reflection, hand beginning to shake. Surely, after seeing James again, after being given a purpose, a way to redeem himself, he can let it go. Let the ghosts go. Surely he can focus his attention entirely on his new plan. And do it sober.

Really?

Regulus winces at the voice.

Just gonna forget about me huh?

It feels like Evan is standing right behind him, head tilted, smirk hanging from his mouth.

Oh c’mon Reg, you can’t really be surprised to see me, right? I mean, if it weren’t for you I’d still be alive.

“I know,” he croaks, eyes suddenly squeezed shut. The thing is, it doesn’t really sound like Evan. The voice maybe, but the words, the cruel lilt—Evan might have spoken to other people that way but never Regulus.

You reckon my mum will ever get my body back?

Regulus’s hand tightens around the mirror’s edge.

Or will I just rot in the Ministry forever? Where you left me?

“God, stop.”

The voice laughs. Nothing like him. Exactly like him.

No.

You don’t get to make demands. Not now. Not after what you did to me.

And that’s it. That’s all he has in him, swinging the mirror open and reaching for one of the bottles.

Evan laughs again.

Damn Reg. I knew you were weak, but I didn’t know you were quite this pathetic.

Regulus doesn’t argue. He’s not sure he could ever sink low enough to surprise himself.

His thoughts are duller when he heads down the stairs a few minutes later. The voices silenced. Nothing but indistinct murmurs in the corners of his mind. He knows he won't be able to keep this going, especially with James. But for now at least...it helps.

He'll stop when he has to.

When he absolutely has to.

"You is being awake sir!" Kreacher says as Regulus walks into the kitchen, the smells of breakfast wrapping around him like a warm hug—coffee and sausage and eggs. Regulus has barely made it to the table before Kreacher is sliding a full plate towards him. Regulus doesn't sit, looking down and then back up.

"Cerci?"

"Miss Greengrass is in the library," the house elf points emphatically at the plate. "Eat."

"Not hungry."

He isn't fast enough to duck out of the way when Kreacher hurls a dish towel at his face.

"No! No, no, no!" Kreacher chants, throwing his arms up in the air as Regulus pulls the towel off his head. "You will be eating this!" There is something like violence in his eyes.

"Okay, okay, jeez," Regulus puts his hands up in surrender, doing his best not to laugh because Kreacher really does seem very serious. "I'll eat it, I promise, I just want to see what Cerci is up to first."

"Take it with you then!"

Regulus arches his brow. "You're going to let me eat in the library?"

"I is being desperate!" and Regulus gets the feeling that he is one more question away from getting another dish towel thrown at him.

"I'll eat it, I promise!" he takes a bite out of one of the pieces of toast to prove his point.

Kreacher crosses his arms over his chest, still glaring. "The whole thing Master Regulus."

Regulus rolls his eyes, picking up the plate as he swallows. "Fine. But I'm doing it in the library," and then, for good measure; "and I'm going to get crumbs everywhere."

Kreacher winces. "You is being very like your brother right now sir."

That makes Regulus stumble, but when he turns back Kreacher is facing away, washing the dishes. He knows that Kreacher only meant that he's being a brat. But that comparison has never been easy for Regulus to swallow and he just wasn't...expecting it.

Eventually he gets his feet to start moving again.

Cerci is sitting at the back of the library in one of the old velvet chesterfields, her legs pulled up and feet tucked under her, a book open in her lap. Regulus drops his plate of food on the coffee table between them before collapsing into the other chair.

“Brought you food.”

“Already ate,” she says cheerfully. “Kreacher’s eggs benedict may be the most amazing thing I’ve ever put in my mouth.”

Regulus gives her a weak smile even though she can’t see it, leaning over to pick at his plate now that there’s no chance of pawning it off on Cerci. He manages to get down a few more bites before he gives up, sitting back in his chair.

“I’m sorry about...last night.”

Cerci looks up, her eyes soft. “One of your best friends just died Reg, you’re allowed to get a little...messy.”

He isn’t sure why that makes his chest grow so tight but he just nods stiffly. “Thanks,” and then, desperate to change the subject. “Which room did you sleep in then?”

“The purple one,” looking back down at her book.

Regulus can practically hear his mother shrieking in Scotland at the insinuation that there is a purple room in her house. “Which one?” he asks, mildly amused.

She waves her hand in the air dismissively. “You know, second floor with the floral wallpaper and the little purple flowers.”

“Ah, Aunt Mildred’s room.”

She looks up at him again. “It’s somebody’s bedroom? I thought it was a guest room?”

Regulus shrugs. “I mean, it is now.”

“What happened to Mildred?”

“She died.”

Cerci’s eyes grow wide. “Please tell me she didn’t die in that room?”

Regulus can’t keep the grin off his face. “Don’t worry, Kreacher changed the sheets. Well, at least I think he did.”

“Oh my god! You are the worst!” Cerci tries to kick his legs, but Regulus pulls them up onto the seat of his chair, laughing.

Cursing his name under her breath Cerci turns back to her book. It's a big leather bound thing, with long pages of cursive writing Regulus can't quite make out from where he's sitting.

"What are you looking at then?" he asks.

"Hogwarts's registry."

He arches his brow. "Looking for Voldemort?" she makes an affirming sound. "And how exactly are you going to find a name you don't know?"

"Well, I figure he's got to be from one of the Sacred Twenty-Eight right?"

"Seems likely."

"But we know all those families, so I wonder if he's the last of his line, I'm looking for names that have disappeared—Gaunt, Peverell, Shafiq—seeing if anything pops up."

Regulus nods thoughtfully. "Any luck?"

She lets out a breath, blowing the hair off her forehead. "Not really. It doesn't help that I'm not exactly sure how old he is so I'm only guessing about what years I should be looking at. What about you?"

Regulus blinks. "Me?"

"You said you would look into Voldemort," and when he continues to stare blankly at her. "The name? Its origins? see where he got it from?" she doesn't say "duh" but it feels like it's implied.

"Right," the potions are making his thoughts too sluggish for this and he can already see the concern creeping into Cerci's eyes. "Er—no mention of a Voldemort in any kind of mythology or history I can find. My best guess is it's French in origin. Seems to be three words put together: vol—de—mort."

Now it's Cerci's turn to look blank. "Sorry, is that supposed to mean something to me? Because I'm pretty sure you just made a bunch of noises."

Regulus rolls his eyes, though it's work to hold back his smile. "You could interpret it a couple different ways. It could mean flight from death or flight of death or stolen from death. My money's on the first one though."

Cerci's biting her lower lip, rubbing her chin. "So maybe he's French then? And his name, his real one, might be french too?"

Regulus shrugs. "I mean, could be. But I'm french, and my name is Regulus Black so..."

She grimaces. "Good point." She's looking a little dejected, which Regulus just can't have, so he reaches his foot out and nudges her's.

“Hey,” he says, “you got another one of those registries for me to look through?”

She smiles, reaching beside her where Regulus can now see a stack of near identical books piled on the floor by her chair. “Do I ever.”

The Hogwarts school registry is about as interesting as you would imagine. Lists of names, dates, signatures. Regulus tries to keep his eyes focused, tries not to let his mind drift. This is important. He needs to figure out what Voldemort is using as a Horcrux and where he’s keeping it. And in order to do that he needs to know who the fuck Voldemort actually is.

“What if this is all pointless,” he says after about an hour of running through lists of names. “What if he’s choosing his object and his location based on strategy not...sentimentality?”

Cerci makes a dismissive noise. “Please, an egomaniac like Voldemort? Everything he does revolves around himself, I can’t believe this would be any different.”

Regulus actually feels his mouth fall open and when he doesn’t manage to form a reply Cerci looks up.

“What?”

“I just,” he struggles to get his voice back, half laughing. “I can’t believe you just said that.”

“Why not? It’s true.”

Now he really does laugh, short and disbelieving. “Well for one, because he’s—he’s who he is. And two, because I think lots of people would disagree with you.”

She looks at him quizzically. “About what?”

“That he does everything for himself. He’s the leader of the revolution, he wants Wizards to be recognized as above all other beings, to protect their magic. That’s—lots of people believe in that.”

But Cerci rolls her eyes. “Lots of people are idiots. Voldemort doesn’t care about Wizard-kind. He cares about Voldemort.”

Regulus finds his eyes bouncing around the room, suddenly paranoid that somehow they’re being listened to because this—even if you think like this, most people know better than to say so out loud. At least in Grimmauld Place.

“Well...” Regulus says eventually. “I’ve never heard anyone put it quite like that.”

“That’s because I’m smarter than everyone else, obviously,” she shoots him a wink, turning to the next page in her registry. Regulus watches her for a moment.

“Have your parents’ views changed? The last you said they didn’t care much either way, they just didn’t want to get involved?”

Cerci rolls her eyes. “It’s about the only thing my mother has ever not wanted to get involved in. But no, that’s still how they feel. Wait it out, commit to no one, and cozy up to whoever wins.”

“It sounds like you don’t agree with that?”

She sighs, giving up on the registry for the moment and sitting back in her chair. “I think...I think there’s a lot of this that I don’t understand. Politics is not my strong suit. But...I liked Timmy Finchley.”

Regulus blinks, feeling like he’s missed something. “Timmy Finchley?”

“He was my partner in Herbology in fifth year and sixth year and he was nice. And funny. And he helped me out this one time when I didn’t know the answers on a pop quiz.”

None of this is clearing anything up for Regulus. “I don’t understand...what does Timmy Finchley have to do with the war?”

Cerci stares back at him. “He’s Muggle born.”

There’s a beat of silence.

“Oh.”

“And he was brilliant at Herbology,” Cerci goes on. “Probably the best in the class. Better than me. So I don’t know how you could say he wasn’t a real Wizard. How you could say he didn’t deserve to be there. Or that his magic wasn’t as strong as everybody else’s because it was. Or—what about Mary Macdonald?”

Regulus feels something like nausea at the mention of Mary Macdonald. “What about her?”

“She was like, the most amazing Quidditch player I’ve ever seen.”

Regulus gives her a look. “The most amazing?”

Cerci rolls her eyes. “Yeah, yeah, after you, of course.”

“Thank you.”

“But she was amazing, you can’t deny that?”

“No, I can’t.”

“And she’s a Muggle born and if Voldemort had his way we never would have gotten to see her play and that would have been a shame. Like sucking some of the beauty out of the world.”

“You really think Mary Macdonald is that important?” Regulus asks before he can stop himself.

Cerci blinks at him. "I think everyone is important," and then, while Regulus is still trying to grasp that; "So I'm not claiming to understand all the complexities of what is going on here. But I do know that Muggle borns deserve to be treated better than they have been. And I've never met any Muggles, but I'm sure the same goes for them." It's so simple for her. Caring. It isn't like that for Regulus. It's this tangled up thing, hard to drag to the surface, to sort out. For Regulus caring is a finite resource, like he has to be careful who he chooses to spend it on or he'll run out. He's not sure why that is. Not sure what's wrong with him.

"You've never said anything to me."

Cerci's brows draw together. "What do you mean?"

"You know what I am," Regulus manages, flipping his left forearm up without even thinking. He sees Cerci's eyes snap to it and then back to his face. "But you've never said anything?"

It takes her a moment, her eyes thoughtful, Regulus can practically see her mind turning. "Do you think Timmy Finchley is less of a Wizard than you?"

Regulus pokes and prods that thought. "No."

"Even though his parents are Muggles?"

Regulus nods slowly. "Yes," because he's nothing if not rational, and rationally he knows that Muggle borns got top marks in plenty of his courses, not just Timmy Finchley.

"Then why exactly do you have that thing on your arm Regulus?"

He opens and closes his mouth. Not sure what to say. There are so many reasons. So many that he can't believe the one that makes it out of his mouth is: "I was scared."

And he had been, whatever James thinks. He really had been.

Scared about so many things.

Still is.

Cerci gives him a sad smile. "Like I said, I don't understand all the complexities."

It's an out he knows he doesn't deserve. That he feels dirty for making her give him. He wants to tell her that she doesn't need to, that he's not worth bending her morals for, but just as he's opening his mouth the house shakes.

Regulus rolls his eyes even though his whole body goes tense, hands gripping tight to the arms of his chair.

"Merlin," Cerci scrambles to keep the book from slipping off her lap. "He's still trying to get in?"

Regulus grits his teeth. "Yup."

“You’d think he’d take the hint.”

Regulus gives her a wane smile. “Taking hints is not Lucius’s specialty”

There’s another shake, a few books falling off the shelves around them. It doesn’t usually go on for long—Lucius trying to break his wards—like he’s just tapping on his door, reminding Regulus that he’s there. That he wants in.

“It wouldn’t...I mean, you don’t think it would be simpler just to see what he wants?” Cerci asks tentatively, clearly aware that she isn’t seeing the whole picture.

“No,” he can’t quite bring himself to explain more than that, but Cerci just nods, not forcing him to.

“Aren’t you worried about what he’ll do when he sees you again? He’ll have to eventually right? If Voldemort summons you?”

“Lucius won’t do anything in public, especially not in front of Voldemort,” or at least that’s what Regulus is banking on. He hasn’t seen or spoken to Lucius since the day of the attack on the Ministry.

Another thunderous shake ripples through the house.

He’s locked them all out of his wards at this point; Lucius, Narcissa, Bellatrix. Fuck family. Besides, the last thing he needs is one of them showing up and figuring out what him and Cerci are working on.

“Hold on,” Cerci slams her finger down in the middle of the page she’s reading. “I recognize that name.”

Regulus looks up. “What name?”

But Cerci isn’t paying attention, already scrambling through the pile of books at her side and pulling up a relatively small one.

“Cerci, what name?”

“Tom Marvolo Riddle,” she mutters, still flipping through the book.

Regulus scrunches his face. “Riddle? That’s not a pureblood family.”

“No, that’s not the name I recognize,” Cerci mutters.

“Is it Tom? Because I hate to break it to you but that’s a pretty common name.”

“No I—ah ha!” she says triumphantly, before holding up the book to show Regulus.

He leans forward, squinting. It’s a book on the Scared Twenty-Eight he realizes, and she’s showing him a page dictating the members of one particular family, finger pointing to a name.

“Marvolo Gaunt,” Regulus reads out loud before looking back at Cerci. “You think there’s a connection?”

“Tom might be a common name, but Marvolo is not.”

Regulus can’t really argue with that.

Cerci has started scanning the page for information about the Gaunt family. “Hey, they’re descendants of Salazar Slytherin,” she looks up at Regulus. “Isn’t Voldemort a Parseltongue?”

“He is.”

“That’s a pretty rare skill, Salazar’s descendants are some of the only wizards known to have that.”

“Okay,” Regulus takes a deep breath, trying not to let them get ahead of themselves. “But where the hell does Riddle come from? I’ve never heard of any Riddles.”

Cerci shakes her head, flipping to the index of her book and quickly scanning down the list of words and names. “No, they’re not part of the Twenty-Eight anyway.”

“So that means,” Regulus says slowly. “That means if this is Voldemort then...” he can’t quite say it out loud, certain if he does the Dark Lord will suddenly appear and send a streak of green light through his chest.

“I’ll write to Madam Pince, ask for some older registries, see if I can find any Riddles at Hogwarts before this. And maybe some other student records—honour rolls, Quidditch teams—see what else we can find out about Tom.”

“I’ll check the histories,” Regulus gestures to the bookshelves behind them. “See if there are any references to Riddles there.”

Cerci nods, seemingly still deep in thought. “It would make sense though,” she says eventually.

“What would?”

“Voldemort being a half-blood.”

Regulus laughs, because he’s never heard anything that would make less sense.

“No, think about it though,” Cerci goes on. “If he was a pureblood we would have grown up with him, or his mother or his aunt. We’d have gone over to his house for tea or holiday parties. But no one seems to know him, no one seems to be attached to him. Meaning...”

“He isn’t one of us,” Regulus finishes and then, before he can stop himself, he laughs again. “Christ. The Dark Lord, spokesman for blood purity, might have a Muggle dad.”

“Or mum,” Cerci adds quickly.

Regulus dips his head in acknowledgement, still feeling utterly bemused by the whole thing. Still certain they must have it wrong. “Merlin,” he says, swiping a hand over his face, “this all just got so much more complicated.”

He doesn't take any potions before he goes to bed. He is trying. To be better. For James. He's trying not to give up. It's the least he can do. Unfortunately that means he doesn't get much sleep. One nightmare bleeding into the next.

No, please, please, please. I'm a good man. I swear. I'm going to get married, please.

Regulus, I want you to know, that our door is always open okay? If you ever need it.

Come on Reg, have a little faith in me yeah?

They're relentless. The ghosts. Being in his head feels like being on a boat in the middle of a storm. No matter how hard he tries he just keeps taking on water. Every time he thinks his thoughts have shown him the worst of it something more painful comes along and he's sinking all over again.

Eventually he gives up on sleeping. Shaky and sweaty, he lies in his bed, clutching at James's present. He wears it all the time now, never takes it off. Sometimes he talks to the stars, other times he just holds it, letting James's magic hum in the palm of his hand.

Spring.

Spring.

Spring.

It helps. It doesn't fix anything. But it helps.

There's a crack and suddenly Kreacher is standing at the foot of his bed.

“Good, Master Regulus is already awake,” he says as Regulus sits up. “Miss Cerci is waiting for him.”

Regulus blinks, rubbing the sleep from his eyes. “Cerci? Is here?”

“Yes sir.”

“Now?” he looks out the window, it can't be later than eight in the morning. “Why?”

“I is not knowing the courting rituals of witches, but she is here.”

Regulus rolls his eyes. “How many times do I have to tell you we're not courting, Jesus.”

“Well courting or no courting she is being here and waiting, so sir should be getting out of bed.”

Regulus dramatically throws the blankets off of him. “Yeah, yeah, tell her I’ll be down in twenty minutes.”

Kreacher scrunches his face. “You should not be keeping ladies waiting so long.”

“Well then ladies should call ahead of time,” he says as he gets into the shower.

Twenty minutes later Regulus is traipsing down the stairs, curls warm and soft from the drying spell he used. Cerci is standing at the bottom waiting for him, still wearing her coat.

He arches his brow. “Not staying?”

“We’re going on a field trip,” she announces giddily.

“A field trip? Where?”

“Bath.”

Regulus stops at the bottom of the stairs, bemused smile on his face. “Why?”

“Because,” she says, eyes twinkling, “that’s where the Slytherin Archives are.”

“The Slytherin Archives?” he repeats slowly. “What the fuck is that?”

Cerci rolls her eyes. “It’s where they keep the historical records of the Slytherin family. They have a whole room dedicated just to Salazar—his papers, books, letters, some personal items his relatives have been willing to give-up...or sell. I was thinking about going even before yesterday, but now that we know Voldemort might be a descendant of Salazar I think there’s a good chance the Horcrux will be something to do with him.”

Regulus takes this all in, hand going unconsciously to the locket around his neck. “So we’re going to Bath,” he says finally, causing Cerci to smile.

“So we’re going to Bath.”

They Apparate onto the steps of a rather unassuming building—tall and thin, made of a warm white stone, with a slate roof and giant chimney. It’s cold today, nearing December, and Regulus wraps his arms around himself as his teeth start to chatter. There’s an ornate snake shaped knocker on the door but instead of using it Cerci turns to the small intercom on the wall beside it and presses a button. There’s a long pause, Regulus dancing back and forth between his feet trying to keep warm, before a crackly voice speaks to them.

“Hello?”

Cerci leans forward. “Hi! It’s Cerci Greengrass, I have an appointment with Madam Wormstahl to go through the archives this morning?”

There's another pause and then a buzzing noise as the door in front of them clicks open. Cerci walks through with no hesitation, seemingly unafraid, Regulus, on the other hand, slips his wand into his palm. He does not much like walking into strange buildings unarmed.

They enter what appears to be a reception area, with dirty white wall-to-wall carpeting and some generic harp music playing in the background. The witch behind the desk in front of them doesn't look up from the magazine in her lap.

"Take a seat," she waves vaguely at the rickety chairs pushed against the wall. "Wormstahl will be with you shortly."

"Okie dokie," Cerci says happily.

The minute they're sitting a wave of exhaustion hits Regulus, reminding him that he hasn't slept. He didn't take any potions this morning either. Which is an improvement. Should be an improvement. Except it's left him feeling...delicate. A little weak. A little shaky. And so fucking tired. He sighs, leaning back in his chair and resting his head against the wall.

"Hey," he hears Cerci ask softly, "you okay?"

"Hmm," he answers. "Just tired."

He's only going to rest his eyes for a second.

Just a second.

Just—

Evan is lying in his arms, his body a heavy weight, eyes staring straight ahead.

Oh no.

Oh no.

Oh no.

Not again.

Please not again.

Regulus holds the body closer, tightens his grip, a promise not to let go. Not this time.

Evan's dead unseeing eyes suddenly begin to move, it's unnatural, sending shivers down Regulus's spine as they find him.

Don't leave me.

I won't.

I won't.

I promise I won't.

Don't leave me here.

I'm sorry.

I'm sorry.

I'm so sorry.

Don't leave me here Regulus. Don't leave me behind. I don't want to be alone. Don't let them have me.

I won't.

I won't.

I won—

But the hands come out of nowhere. Appearing from somewhere in the dark. Reaching fingers wrapping around Evan's ankles, his wrists.

Regulus struggles, he kicks and thrashes but it's no use. They pull Evan out of his hands.

NO!

No!

No!

And he's so focused on Evan, on the loss of the weight of his body in his arms.

That he doesn't realize he's being pulled under too.

At least not until the moment he stops being able to breathe.

"Regulus!"

He jolts awake, nearly falling out of his chair and wincing away from Cerci's hand on his arm. She instantly pulls back, concern scrawled across her face as Regulus struggles to remember where he is. The woman behind the desk is finally looking up, and there's a new woman—she's small, draped in a green shawl, hair pulled back in a bun.

Regulus drops his head between his knees and tries to breathe, nails digging into his thighs. Fuck.

Fuck this isn't good.

He's shaking, sweat covering every inch of his skin. It had felt so real.

“Regulus?” Cerci’s voice is soft as she crouches down next to him, not trying to touch him again.

“Sorry,” he wheezes, hating himself for this. Hating himself for all of it.

“It’s so okay that I don’t even have a word for how okay it is.”

That makes Regulus huff out a laugh. Or at least something laugh like.

“We’re in Bath,” she says, somehow knowing that being reminded of what is real and happening and now, will help. “At the archives, getting ready to do some sleuthing.”

Inhale.

Exhale.

Inhale.

Exhale.

God he’s getting so tired of this. He doesn’t remember ever having panic attacks this frequently before.

Inhale.

Exhale.

Inhale.

Exhale.

Stop this, he shouts at himself. Stop this right now. You’re being ridiculous.

He forces himself to sit up straight even though he’s still shaking. Even though he probably needs more time. He can’t stand the feeling of having everyone in the room staring at him. Slowly he relaxes his hands, pulling his nails out of his thighs.

Inhale.

Exhale.

“Okay,” his voice is gravelly but at least it comes out of his mouth.

“Okay?” Cerci asks, and Regulus nods. She watches him for a few more seconds, like she’s giving him time to take it back, and when he doesn’t she turns to the woman standing behind them—Wormstahl, Regulus presumes. “Okay,” Cerci says more clearly, “we’re ready.”

The woman looks a little startled, “We can reschedule if you aren’t feeling...up to it, today?”

Cerci looks back at Regulus who shakes his head. They’re here already and besides, they don’t have much time. He isn’t exactly sure what Voldemort will do when he learns about

James's baby, but he doesn't want to wait and find out.

"Well," the woman adjusts her posture, seeming to accept that she isn't going to get rid of them, not that Regulus blames her for trying. "Follow me then."

She heads down the hall in front of them, Cerci standing up and offering Regulus her hand. He actually has to take a minute, bracing himself against the chorus of

weak

weak

weak

that runs through his head before he can force himself to take her hand. Knowing he needs it.

"Do you want me to let go?" Cerci whispers as they follow their guide, fingers still laced together.

He grits his teeth. "No." Because it helps. Having something solid. And real. Having something he can trust.

He's getting worse. The anxiety, the panic—it's getting worse. The potions help, but they have their own side effects, Regulus knows that, he does. Knows that people get addicted to them. Maybe he's one of those people, he can't tell, it doesn't feel quite that simple. He just knows that he can't go to James like this. He needs to find a way to get himself under control.

"The archives here cover a wide variety of areas," the woman in front of them says before pulling out her wand and unlocking the door on their right. Everything about this building is bland and uniform. Regulus isn't sure what he was expecting exactly, but after growing up in Grimmauld Place he can't help but feel that Salazar would not have appreciated his legacy being stored in such drab surroundings.

"The Slytherin family has a long and complicated history spanning many centuries," she opens the door and leads them into a room with a low ceiling, harsh lights, and rows and rows of shelves. "But going off your letter you're specifically interested in Salazar?"

"Yes that's right," Cerci says cheerfully, looking around.

"Everyone always is," in a tone of voice that can't be described as anything other than disdainful. "A pity, when the family has done so much more than simply help build a school."

Regulus looks over at the woman, a bit impressed that she's just been able to make the founding of one of the most infamous magical schools in the entirety of human history sound unimpressive.

"Over there we have artefacts," she gestures to a row of cabinets by the windows. "They're locked, but the outside is labelled with the contents so if you wish to view any of the items you must tell me and I will handle them for you. You are not permitted to touch any of them yourself, understood?"

Cerci shoots Regulus a look before smiling at the woman. “Absolutely.”

They receive a curt nod in response. “The shelves in front of us are all the paper documents we have. These,” she puts great emphasis on the word, “you may touch yourselves but you cannot write on them or near them, there will be no folding down corners or underlining of any kind, understood?”

“Absolutely,” Cerci answers again, causing the woman to stare her down for a minute, like she’s trying to figure out whether or not she’s being mocked.

“Very well, feel free to have a look around and ask me if you have any questions.”

Cerci turns to Regulus, eyebrow raised. “Well, what do you reckon?”

He looks out at the mountains of stuff in front of them, not sure how exactly they’re going to sift through all of it to find anything useful. Eventually he shrugs: “You start at one end, I start at the other?”

Cerci smiles. “Perfect.”

It would probably help if they had some idea what they were looking for. Mostly Regulus is just trying to see if there are places or objects that Salazar brings up a lot. Though most of his writing seems to be purely academic. Discussing different material breakdowns in potions—which, yes, okay, Regulus does actually find interesting—and comparing various chopping and brewing techniques. He has one letter to a friend in which he goes on for three pages about the appropriate thickness for cauldron bottoms.

He also writes a lot about the need of Wizards to guard themselves against Muggles. He does not think that they should be attempting to build political relationships with them, does not believe the Muggles can be trusted to honour any agreements they make. He writes very strong letters to the prominent leaders of the Wizarding world at the time. Not politicians as much as petty lords, each with their own tiny fiefdoms and array of vassals.

Which is fascinating.

Unhelpful.

But fascinating.

Regulus sighs, pushing the hair out of his face as he pulls out another folder of letters. He’s expecting more of the same—politics and potion theory—but then he reads the first line:

Ma moitié

Regulus stops. Rubs his eyes. Reads the line again.

Ma moitié

My other half. My better half. That's what that means, he's heard his father use it when referring to his mother once or twice. It's meant for intimates. Friends, lovers—

Ma moitié,

I was on a walk the other day, in the forest around my home, and I couldn't help thinking about that time when we were young. Fifteen? Sixteen? And you declared that you'd had enough of farm work and from now on you wanted to instead be an adventurer. The look on your father's face, I thought for certain he was going to end you. But then, you always got away with more foolishness than the rest of us (don't even try to deny it you know it's true). So instead he told you to go on, to try to be an adventurer, to survive on your own in the wilderness without all the comforts of the farm. You were the only one of us who didn't seem to know exactly how that was going to end.

I would have been happy to leave you to it, but, of course, you weren't having that. Wherever you went I was bound to follow. So we loaded our sacs with a few supplies, and a map we could barely read, and set off on what was inevitably going to be an absolute failure. That first night, out in the wilderness, it rained, do you remember? Started pouring and neither of us knew any spells to keep dry, so eventually we found a cave—well, or at least a spot where the cliffs hung out just enough to offer us some shelter.

You started a fire, both of us stripping out of our wet clothes and laying them out to dry, down to nothing but our undergarments. We hadn't even kissed yet at that point and seeing you, standing there in all your youthful glory, was absolute agony. You were beautiful even then, before you had properly grown into yourself, properly become the hero everyone knows you as today. Colour high in your cheeks from the fire, hair plastered to your head from the rain. I'm rather impressed I didn't just fall to pieces right then.

And then. You had the audacity to turn to me and beckon. BECKON. Honestly, one smooth gesture, one flick of your wrist. "We'll have to sleep together," you said, so self-assured, as though it was the most natural thing in the world, "to ward off the cold." Ha. But Merlin help me I was powerless against that. The pair of us lying down, the single blanket we'd brought wrapped around us. I swear my poor heart almost combusted at the feel of you against my back, your arm around my waist, mouth at the nape of my neck.

Do you remember what you said then? Do you remember? The fire dying, the sound of the rain in the trees surrounding us, me slowly drifting to sleep in your arms you said: "I want to always be this close to you."

I'm not sure I've ever recovered from that. Even all these years later.

I know there is a great deal of life that separates us now, that things are not nearly as simple as they were when we were fifteen. But I can't help but hope that you still long for the days when we fell asleep in one another's arms. Can't help but hope that after it all you still want to be that close to me. Because not a day goes by that I don't feel your absence at my side. That I don't ache with all the time we've lost.

One day maybe, you will feel the urge to be an adventurer again. And find your way back to me.

Yours always,

S.

Regulus stares at that last line for a long time.

S.

It's not possible. It's not. Before he can stop himself he starts flipping through the other letters. Most of them start the same way "Ma moitié" a few just begin with "Love" others have no beginning address at all but instead start as though already in the middle of a conversation. He's nearly at the end when he finds what he's looking for, pulling the letter out of the stack,

Hello G,

it starts, and Regulus feels his heart run head first into his ribs.

Because it's impossible. Unthinkable. And yet...and yet...

G&S

Still staring at the page in front of him Regulus gets up and stumbles towards Madam Wormstahl. "Was Salazar Slytherin married?" he asks numbly, looking up at the older woman. She puts down the parchment she'd been reading.

"No, he—"

"FAMOUSLY A HERMIT!" Cerci calls from somewhere in the stacks. "I told you that the first time we met Reg JEEEEZ."

Regulus rolls his eyes, the woman in front of him looking somewhat disgruntled. "He was a recluse later in life," she goes on when she's composed herself again, "moving out to the country and socializing only when forced."

"But his line doesn't end with him?" Regulus asks.

"No, it was continued by one of his cousins."

"He didn't have any brothers or sisters?" Regulus can hear Cerci walking towards them from the back of the room.

"No, his immediate family and most of his mother's relatives were killed when their home was attacked by Muggles."

Cerci gasps. "Oh my god that's awful."

The woman nods soberly. “Yes, quite, he was haunted by it for most of his life. Luckily, however, his father’s family lived to the South and therefore the Slytherin line was able to continue.”

“But that means there are no direct descendants of Salazar Slytherin?” Cerci is at Regulus’s side now, looking a little concerned.

Wormstahl nods again. “That’s correct.”

“No,” Cerci shakes her head. “No it isn’t. I’ve read the histories of the Sacred Twenty-Eight, the Gaunt line claims direct lineage to Salazar.”

Wormstahl doesn’t roll her eyes, but Reg thinks it’s a near thing. “Yes well, people will claim a lot of things if they think it will gain them status and power. But I am telling you now Salazar never had any children, or if he did, they were illegitimate and unrecognized.”

“And what about Godric Gryffindor?” Regulus cuts back in, feeling a little impatient. He couldn’t care less about bloodlines right now.

Both Wormstahl and Cerci turn to him with surprised expressions on their faces. “What about Godric Gryffindor?”

“Did he marry?”

Still looking confused, Wormstahl nods, slowly. “Yes, Godric married, had several children. Though later in life I believe him and his wife amicably agreed to live apart. And he moved out to the woods, tiring of being in the public eye.”

“He moved out to the country,” Regulus repeats, almost laughing. “Like Salazar?”

“Well I doubt very much it was the same countryside.”

“But you don’t know?”

She adjusts herself in her seat, clearly uncomfortable admitting that there is something she doesn’t know; “No, I don’t believe the exact locations of either of their homes have ever been discovered.”

“So they might have lived together then?” Cerci pipes up, sounding intrigued.

Wormstahl shoots her a disapproving look. “I very much doubt so. I can’t see why either of them would want to.”

No, Regulus thinks, looking back down at the letters in his hands, no I’m sure you can’t. He does laugh then, because James was right. Ridiculous, illogical, absurd James Potter had been right. He brushes his thumb gently over the S at the bottom of the page in front of him.

“I’m not sure what about that is amusing to you,” Wormstahl wraps her shawl more tightly around her shoulders.

“Nothing,” Regulus shakes his head, trying to get his expression under control. “Just... thought of something else. My apologies. One more question, these letters,” he holds them up, “Are their counterparts somewhere? It seems like they were all written to the same person.”

Wormstahl pushes her glasses down to the tip of her nose and motions with her hand for him to pass them over. Reluctantly, Regulus does.

“Ah yes,” she says as she begins to flip through them. “The love letters.”

“Love letters!” Cerci says excitedly, shimmying her shoulders. “How scandalous.”

The woman glares at her. “There is absolutely nothing scandalous about them, it was perfectly suitable for a man of his stature to write letters to the woman he was courting.”

“But he never married,” Regulus asks as she hands the letters back to him.

“No.”

“And we don’t know who he was writing to?”

“These were found floating around on the black market, being sold for a very hefty price. Older families sometimes fall on hard times and take to selling heirlooms,” the disgust she feels about this is clear on her face. “But the counterparts weren’t with them, nor have they been found anywhere else. It’s possible Salazar burnt them, jilted lovers almost always prioritize themselves over historical record.”

Cerci starts to laugh and then quickly turns it into a cough when the woman’s ere swings in her direction.

“Got it,” Regulus says, holding back his own smirk. “Thank you,” he turns around and gives Cerci a little shove. “Behave,” he whispers as they head back towards the shelves.

“Jilted lovers prioritize themselves over historical record,” she repeats, barely containing her giggles.

Regulus spends the rest of their time at the archives shamelessly reading the letters. He goes slow, desperate for every detail, wishing he had the other half of the conversation, that he could know what Godric was saying back. There are so many of them—years worth—that by the time they’re leaving, several hours later, he still hasn’t managed to get through them all.

Madam Wormstahl escorts them back to the front door and Cerci thanks her graciously for her help as they step out into the wintery afternoon.

“Where are you going?” Regulus asks as Cerci starts walking down the steps and onto the street. “We can Apparate from here.”

“Pfft,” she says, staring up at him from the pavement. “Come on Reg, we’re in Bath,” she throws her arms out. “Lets sightsee.”

Regulus makes a disgusted face. “You want me to be a tourist?”

“Oh come on you snob, humour me. Besides, you spend too much time shut up in your house anyway.”

“Do not.”

“Do too.”

Regulus rolls his eyes. “Fine. What exactly do you want to sightsee then?”

She beams at him. “I knew you’d come around. There’s a great ice cream shop just down the street.”

“Ice cream, Cerci it’s freezing!”

“Oh it’s fine,” she says as she starts walking, hands stuffed in the pockets of her coat. “Well, come on!”

Grumbling Regulus follows, though he isn’t happy about it.

The ice cream shop is small and cutesy—everything pink with white frills. Cerci makes small talk with the cashier, stopping only to ask Regulus what flavour he wants. When he once again insists that it is too cold for ice cream she just orders him chocolate.

“This is absurd,” his teeth chatter as they push back out into the cold, clutching their ice creams, since there was nowhere to sit in the shop.

“You’re being dramatic,” Cerci says, steering them towards an open bench with a view of the street. It’s all old buildings and cobblestones. Undeniably pretty, even if Regulus refuses to admit so out loud.

“I can’t eat this Cerci,” he says as they sit down. “I’m going to get hypothermia or something.”

She rolls her eyes, pulling her wand out and giving it a tiny flick. A second later Regulus feels the unmistakable sensation of a warming charm descending on him. He turns to her, sarcastically aghast.

“That was illegal!”

“Yeah well,” she licks her ice cream. “The Ministry has bigger things to worry about than a cheeky warming charm.”

And, well, Regulus can’t exactly argue with that.

It's quiet out, likely because of the cold, a few people walking down the street with grocery bags in their hands, shoulders pressed together, heads bowed against the wind. It's mid-afternoon, the clouds drifting in front of the sun and occasionally blocking it from view, though the beams that slip down twinkle and sparkle off the windows of the buildings on either side of the street.

"So," Cerci says eventually, "did you finish them?"

He looks over at her, there's a spot of ice cream on her nose that he considers telling her about but ultimately decides not to.

"Did I finish what?"

Cerci rolls her eyes, "Oh come on, you were glued to that one spot for hours—the letters! Did you finish them?"

"Oh," he takes a lick of his own ice cream, which he has to admit, is very good. "No, there were hundreds of them, it looks like they were talking that way for years. But it shouldn't take me too long to get through the rest."

"You're planning to come back?" Cerci asks, sounding surprised, and it's work for Regulus not to grimace. He probably could have kept that last sentence to himself. He opts not to answer and to instead focus a ridiculous amount of attention on his ice cream, but he can feel Cerci's eyes on him.

"Regulus..." she says his name slowly. "Did you—you didn't...steal the letters did you?"

Again, he doesn't answer, but he does shoot her a look that has Cerci throwing her hands in the air and nearly chucking her ice cream across the street.

"Are you kidding me! You know that's an actual crime, right?"

Regulus licks his lips, shrugging. "Yes well, like you said, I think the Ministry has bigger problems right now."

"Honestly," she mutters, head shaking. "I can't take you anywhere," though there's a smile tugging at the corner of her mouth that suggests she doesn't mean it.

"Oh come on, I couldn't leave them there with that woman, they deserve better than that."

"So you orchestrated a rescue mission for some love letters?"

"Well when you put it like that it sounds ridiculous."

Cerci has started to giggle, which Regulus does not appreciate, the noise filling up the empty street around them, bouncing off the stone walls. "You're such a sap."

Regulus just rolls his eyes, returning his attention to his ice cream and refusing to look at her again until she calms down. He's not a sap. Absolutely not. Ask anyone.

“You know,” she says, once she’s pulled herself back together, licking the melted ice cream off her hand. “I like the idea of writing love letters.”

Regulus turns to her, feeling the shift in her tone—the new sincerity she’s trying and failing to hide. “Yeah?”

Cerci nods, not really meeting his eye. “It’s really intimate, reading a letter about someone’s feelings for you. It’s this way to be close to them, to give them a part of you, that isn’t about...”

“Sex?”

She sighs, sounding tired. “I guess. It’s just—sometimes when you stand in a room with someone and you try to be vulnerable it feels like...a means to an end. But with love letters it’s...you have all these feelings and you’re telling this person and it connects you to each other and neither of you is expecting more than that. The point of a love letter is just to feel.”

She bites down on her lower lip nervously. “Is that a stupid thing to say?”

Regulus shakes his head. “No.”

“I just, I have all these feelings in my chest, and I want to give them to someone but...I don’t know how to do that without leaving them wanting more.”

Regulus looks out at the street for a moment, thinking. Trying to figure out what to say. Finally, after swallowing the last of his ice cream, he speaks: “Is there...someone specific we’re talking about here?”

Cerci’s cheeks flush pink. “I—maybe.”

“Okay, that’s—that’s good. That’s cool. Um...” Merlin he’s bad at this. “Is he...nice?”

“She’s amazing.”

Regulus nods, laughing a little. “Well okay, not to, y’know, state the obvious here but, have you tried...talking to her?”

“Of course I’ve talked to her,” Cerci says, but her voice is a little too squeaky to be believable. It takes about three seconds of Regulus staring silently back at her for Cerci to crack. “I HAVE talked to her,” she says again, “A lot. About school and her job and where she wants to travel and how her favourite vegetable is squash because it’s decorative and tasty.”

Regulus arches his brow. “You’ve talked about her favourite vegetable?”

Cerci glares at him. “That’s a perfectly reasonable thing to ask someone.”

“I’m sorry, you actually ASKED her about her favourite vegetable?”

Cerci throws her arms in the air. “Can we not mock me right now!”

“Fine, fine, sorry,” Regulus bites down on his lip, trying to hold in his laughter. “Okay, so you’ve talked...about...vegetables,” Cerci looks ready to punch him again so he moves on quickly, “But have you, you know, talked about how you...feel?”

She continues to glare which has Regulus holding his hands up in surrender. “Listen I’m just saying, she can’t read your mind—well, unless she’s good at Legilimency, in which case I guess maybe you don’t have to tell her anything.”

Cerci rolls her eyes. “She’s not reading my mind.”

“Well, then...”

Cerci groans, taking a large bite out of her ice cream cone and then, with a full mouth: “Whamt do I evwen sway?”

Regulus grimaces, “You have terrible table manners, you know that?”

Cerci kicks his foot. “First of all,” she says once she’s properly swallowed her food. “There’s not even a table here. And second of all, you’re spending too much time with Kreacher, you’re starting to sound like him.”

Regulus kicks her back.

“Just tell your stupid crush that you have a stupid crush on her.”

“You say that like it’s simple,” some of the amusement has drained out of her voice, and Regulus knows that she has more to say so he lets the silence linger, lets her find her words. “I just—“ she starts and then stops, sighing in frustration. “I just want to be with her all the time.”

“Okay, so tell her that—I mean, maybe not exactly that, that sounds a bit like she might wake up to find you hovering at the end of her bed watching her sleep or like, saving strands of her hair or something. But a more casual version of that.”

Cerci makes a disgruntled noise. “I don’t know how to be casual.”

Which Regulus thinks might actually be true.

“Maybe try just asking her on a date?” he suggests, fairly certain that’s something normal people do casually.

Cerci looks uncertain again, biting her lip. “But won’t that be like leading her on? Don’t dates normally end with, you know, shagging?”

“No,” Regulus says, and then, “I mean, I don’t think so? Honestly I’ve never really been on a date.”

Cerci’s head snaps towards him. “What! Not even with your boy toy? I really am going to have to have a talk with him.”

Regulus rolls his eyes, hating the way the colour rushes to his cheeks. “I don’t have—ugh, I can’t even say it.”

“Boy toy?” she grins as he pushes her. “Too late to take it back Reg, drunk you already spilled the beans. Though he neglected to mention that this boy hasn’t taken you on a date!”

Regulus shakes his head, looking away and trying to keep his expression under control. “It’s complicated,” and then, because he’s being reckless, “Actually, I guess we’ve been on one date. Kind of.”

“Oooh, tell me more, I need ideas.”

“We went swimming,” Merlin that was so long ago. He sees little flashes—warm sunlight, James smiling at him from the water.

“Like you went to the beach?”

“No, it was...kind of...a waterfall.”

“Excuse me!!!” he feels Cerci sit up beside him but he vehemently refuses to look at her, face already too red. “Your date was to a waterfall! That is like the most romantic thing I have ever heard!”

“Yeah well,” Regulus does his best to keep his voice blank, “he’s stupid like that.”

“Stupid romantic, you mean?”

“Okay, can we move on now please? I thought we were talking about your love life?”

“I don’t have a love life,” she says, loud enough that she scares some of the pigeons that had gathered not that far from them.

“Well ask this girl out and you will,” and then, when she starts grumbling under her breath, he knocks their shoulders together. “Listen just...just be honest, that’s all anyone can ask,” he feels like a fucking hypocrite as the words leave his mouth.

And then something else occurs to him. “Have you...talked to your mum about...any of this?”

Another groan leaves Cerci’s mouth. “No, she’s still inviting eligible bachelors over for dinner every weekend. It’s torture.”

Regulus grimaces. “I’ve always hated dinner parties.”

“It wouldn’t be so painful if any of them were half-decent, if maybe I could at least like one of them, you know? But they’re all awful.”

Regulus can imagine, he’s been forced into close proximity with the sons of pureblood families for the majority of his life. Barty and Evan were always the only two he could stand. Or maybe that’s misrepresenting things, because they were also the only two who ever gave

him the time of day. Everyone else wanted to play with Sirius. Regulus can't blame them. He wanted to play with Sirius too.

"What about your mum?"

He blinks, coming back to the present. "My mum?"

"Isn't she trying to marry you off as well?"

"Ah," with everything else going on, his mother's desire to find him a wife has somewhat fallen off his radar. "To be honest, I haven't really been...speaking to her."

Cerci looks surprised. "And she hasn't just shown up at Grimmauld?"

"I think—" Regulus clears his throat. "I think my father dying is taking up a lot of her time right now," he doesn't quite manage to say that without his voice cracking.

"Oh Reg," Cerci reaches out, squeezing his hand. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay, really," he takes a deep breath. "It's been coming for a long time I just..." he looks away. "I feel bad, about not going to see him, but I don't want to worry him. I want to be... I'm not...right now just isn't a good time."

He'll see right through me.

I'll break his heart.

Regulus lets out a shaking breath. "Okay, changing topics again—did you find anything useful in there," he nods back towards the archives.

Cerci grimaces. "Not really, except that nothing is missing from their collections—nothing out on loan or stolen."

"So if Voldemort is using something connected to Slytherin he didn't get it in there."

She nods. "Apparently members of the Gaunt family are still alive and have some heirlooms they haven't sold, or at least that's what Madam Wormstahl said. She gave me their address so we can try visiting them, see if they know anything."

Regulus runs a hand over his face feeling a little overwhelmed by all the things they don't know. "We're also gonna have to figure out how to destroy the thing once we find it."

"There wasn't anything in the book you read?"

Regulus lets out a frustrated sigh. "I don't have anything in my notes but it's possible I wasn't paying enough attention at the time, that I missed something. Except now I can't go back and check because—"

"Voldemort has it," she finishes for him and Regulus nods. "And the only other copy is at Hogwarts."

“And I can’t exactly see Dumbledore handing it over to either of us.”

“No,” Cerci agrees. “Let’s put a pin in that for now, there must be another book about Horcruxes out there. But first we have to figure out what we’re looking for and where it is. Agreed?”

Regulus sighs. “Agreed.”

“Go team!”

He snorts as she throws her hand up in the air like they’re at a Quidditch match. “I don’t think this is a “go team” moment,” he says, but Cerci only makes a disbelieving sound, looking at Regulus very seriously.

“Any moment is a “go team” moment if you try hard enough.”

And, well, Regulus isn’t about to argue with that.

The second he gets home he rushes up to his bedroom and starts pouring over the letters. Greedily eating up every line. From what he can tell these were written at least a decade after Salazar left Hogwarts and they seem to go on for a decade more before they stop.

Because Godric finally came, whispers the childish voice in his head. Because Salazar finally let him in. Because after spending nearly their entire lives orbiting around one another it was finally time. Alone in the woods they spent their old age together. Hidden from the world.

Or at least that’s how Regulus is deciding the story goes.

Unwilling to accept anything else.

He feels a little giddy, his head filled with pages and pages of words. Words that aren’t his own and yet sometimes feel so close to his heart that he’s certain he’s thought them himself. He wants desperately to tell James. He knows he’ll laugh when he finds out, knows his head will grow at least another two sizes.

He’ll say something like “Of course I got it right. I can’t believe you ever doubted me.”

Before Regulus can stop himself he’s getting off his bed and sitting down at his desk, pulling out a fresh piece of parchment and a quill. Something in him feels lighter than it has in days, in weeks, in years and he knows it’s silly, knows it’s half-in his head. But maybe—maybe if Salazar Slytherin and Godric Gryffindor could find one another after all they’d been through. After all that had happened. Maybe Regulus and James could too.

His quill draws elegantly across the page, the first words squeezing his heart.

Dear J,

PART II REMUS

It's morning, and Remus is shamelessly staring at a slumped over Sirius Black, barely awake enough to keep his head out of his coffee. His hair is an absolute disaster—sticking up in all directions, static-y and probably in need of a good wash. The sunlight is soft and it makes the whole flat glow a sort of warm yellow, but especially Sirius, who looks almost golden in it. And for a moment, just this moment, Remus's life is beautiful.

“Hey,” he nudges Sirius's foot under the table and Sirius looks up, eyes still half shut, lines on his face from the bedsheets. “I love you.”

Something almost...sad, seems to flicker across Sirius's face before he wipes it clean. “Love you too,” he croaks, not quite able to meet Remus's eyes.

Alarm bells ring faintly in Remus's ears as his brows draw together. “Pads what's—“ but he's interrupted by some extremely loud and rude tapping on the window. He turns to see an owl, perched on the sill outside their living room, waiting to be let in. He spares one more look for Sirius who has his head down again, before he gets up to let the bird in.

“Here you go,” he hands it a piece of bacon from his plate as he starts to detach the letter from its leg. The minute the roll of parchment is free the bird takes off, leaving Remus staring after it, a little startled. “Not expecting a response then?” he mutters to no one in particular as he closes the window and returns to the table.

“Who's it from?”

Remus shakes his head, sliding his finger under the wax seal and unrolling the parchment. “Didn't recognize the bird,” he mutters. However, the minute he sees the handwriting he knows who it is.

Dear Remus,

The request you made has been carried out. They'll be expecting you any day now.

Hope you are well,

A. Dumbledore

He reads the lines over a few more times before he finally starts breathing normally again. He always gets worried when he receives post from Dumbledore.

“Moons? Rem? Oi! What does it say?”

He looks up to see Sirius wide awake, staring at him with a worried expression. He must have zoned out for a second. “Sorry—everyone's okay, promise, it's nothing like that,” he sees Sirius's shoulders relax ever so slightly. They're always expecting bad news these days.

“Will you uh,” Remus clears his throat. “Will you come somewhere with me?”

“Anywhere,” Sirius answers so quickly that Remus thinks his heart may actually melt. Sirius flushes, looking away like he’s embarrassed, but he still says: “You know I’d go anywhere with you.”

It takes Remus a few minutes to recover from that.

A few lifetimes.

When his brain starts working again he folds up the letter and slides it into the pocket of his pyjamas, standing up and walking over to Sirius, kissing the top of his head. “Thank you,” he murmurs into his hair before going to get dressed.

Of course it takes Sirius ages to get ready. He spends at least thirty minutes on his hair, though doing what Remus hasn’t the foggiest, even after all these years. When Sirius finally comes out of the bathroom to find Remus leaning against the door with his arms crossed and his brow raised he rolls his eyes.

“Yeah, yeah I know, I know,” he grabs his leather jacket off of the back of the sofa where he tossed it yesterday.

“It’s too cold for that,” Remus says as Sirius comes towards him.

“You can’t let the weather boss you around Moons, you gotta show it who’s in charge,” he shoots Remus a grin as they walk out the door, locking it behind them with the flick of their wands.

“That’s a mad thing to say, you do know that right?”

“I would hope so. I’d hate to start saying sane things. Be bloody boring that.”

Shaking his head Remus pushes Sirius in the direction of the Leaky Cauldron.

“We’re not Apparating today,” he explains when he sees the confused look on the other boy’s face. They maneuver their way through the street, which is not nearly as busy as it would have been a year ago, or two years ago. The attacks and abductions are keeping people away. “We’re taking the Muggle bus.”

“I see,” Sirius says carefully. “You planning on telling me where we’re going or is this more of a surprise thing?”

“We’re going to an orphanage,” Remus does his best to keep his voice casual, like this is a perfectly normal thing to do. He’s not sure he sells it.

“An orphanage?” Sirius repeats. “Why?”

“There’s someone I want to see.”

For a long moment Sirius doesn't speak, long enough that Remus sneaks a peek at him out of the corner of his eyes. He doesn't look angry, which is good, though what he does look Remus isn't quite sure.

"You're being very cryptic," Sirius says eventually.

Remus winces. "I know. I'm sorry," but he isn't sure how much he's allowed to tell him, knows he's already going against Dumbledore by bringing Sirius along he just—he isn't sure he can do this on his own.

There's another long pause before Sirius speaks again. "I'm glad that you're taking me with you this time," his voice is smaller than usual, and it breaks Remus's heart a little bit.

He reaches out, offering his hand, and Sirius immediately tangles their fingers together.

"I always want to take you with me, you know that right?" he says, looking at Sirius properly.

He sees that same sad look from earlier. "Maybe," Sirius says finally. "It's good to hear it though."

Remus squeezes his hand tight. "I always want to take you with me," he repeats.

They look at each other for a long time before Sirius speaks, "Thank you."

Remus lifts their hands up, kissing the back of Sirius's. "Christ Sirius, don't you have fucking gloves you're freezing."

And that makes Sirius laugh, breaking the tension. Sirius pulls his hand free so he can swing his arm around Remus's shoulders and pull him into his side. "What did I tell you about showing the weather who's in charge, huh?"

Sirius is fidgety on the bus. He has no patience, which always makes the process of actually travelling anywhere a chore. In a ridiculous way, Remus feels a little nostalgic about it, thinking back to all those trips on the train when Sirius couldn't sit still. Tapping his feet or jiggling his knees or, in their younger years, running through the cars causing chaos.

In the end it only takes them thirty minutes before they're walking up the drive of an austere looking brick building. There's a black metal fence around it, the lawn more mud than anything else.

"This place gives me the creeps," Sirius whispers as they make their way up the front steps.

"Didn't you literally grow up in a haunted house?" Remus asks as he holds the door open.

Sirius seems to consider this. "The ghosts were honestly the least creepy thing about Grimmauld, but I take your point."

They walk into a small reception area with white tile floors and harsh florescent lights. In front of them sits a brown haired woman behind a desk, she has a pug nose, and a pair of reading glasses on a chain around her neck. Remus suddenly feels uncertain, Dumbledore's letter had been fairly vague and he isn't exactly sure what he's supposed to say here.

The woman looks up at them and smiles. "Well hello there," she beckons them forward. "Don't be shy, don't be shy—my names's Aileen, how can I help you two handsome gentlemen today?" she has a friendly voice.

It's not until Sirius nudges him with his elbow that Remus realizes he's going to have to be the one to handle this social situation. He clears his throat, feeling thoroughly out of his depth. "Yeah, um, we're here to visit Charlotte?"

"Are you on her list?"

Remus blinks. "Her list?"

"Of approved visitors?"

"Er—yes?" Dumbledore said everything was arranged...

"Excellent, just give me your name so that I can double check."

"Right, okay, it's Remus Lupin."

"Ooh, that's a new one, I've never met a Remus before," she says as she walks over to the filing cabinets behind her and starts flipping through folders.

Sirius moves closer to him, their shoulders brushing. "Charlotte?" he asks quietly, but Remus only shakes his head. He can't explain who she is, especially not here.

"Ah! Got it!" Aileen pulls out a piece of paper, eyes scanning through it, Remus's heart hammering in his chest. "Oh you're her Uncle, how lovely. Do you mind just showing me some ID?"

"Uh," yes, actually he does. "I, um—" Merlin he's an idiot. Of course, they need ID. And now he's just standing here, looking dumb and suspicious. Jesus Christ. "I—"

"Oh, sorry mate," Sirius laughs, rummaging in his coat pocket. Remus sees the wand in his sleeve, sees the flick as he transfigures his sunglasses into a small plastic card. "Must have grabbed it by mistake on our way out," he hands the card to Remus and then shoots Aileen an exceptionally charming smile. "Sorry about that."

"Oh no problem at all," she smiles back before reaching her hand out to Remus for the card.

"Oh right," he fumbles a little, awkwardly handing it over. When her head is down, Remus mouths the words "thank you" to Sirius, who gives him a wink.

"Excellent, well, everything seems to be in order," she hands the card back to Remus. "I'll just go get her shall I? I'm so glad you've come, she's been so sad since she was dropped

off.”

Remus’s stomach squeezes, and he does his best to push the feeling away. To push his memories of Lupercal and everything Charlotte’s life would have been like there away.

“So,” Sirius says after Aileen disappears. “Is...is she your’s?”

Remus blinks, turning to look at Sirius who is staring very intently back at him. “Is...she... my what?” he repeats slowly.

“Your kid.”

And that question is so absurd that for a minute Remus is fully incapable of understanding it. And then he’s laughing. Folded over, clutching his knees, laughing. “What?!” that’s all he can get out. “How? How! Are you out of your mind?”

“Well what the hell else am I supposed to think?” Sirius says grumpily.

“Anything,” Remus is still struggling to get control of himself. He straightens up, wiping the tears of mirth from his eyes. “Literally anything else. How could I possibly have a child?”

“Well I don’t know what you get up to, do I?”

There’s a truth in that that Remus doesn’t want to touch right now. That he wants to pretend he can’t hear.

“She’s like five.”

Sirius shrugs. “People have kids when they’re fourteen.”

“Blimey, not me,” he can’t even imagine—he didn’t even know where to start with sex at fourteen.

Sirius makes a humming noise, potentially seeing the sense in this, having known Remus then. “Not your illegitimate love child you’ve been hiding away in a Muggle orphanage for years then?” he doesn’t quite manage to stop his lips from twitching.

Remus snorts, “No, she’s not.”

There’s a pause but Remus can tell Sirius isn’t done. Can feel the words sitting inside him.

“Then who is she?” he asks eventually.

Remus swallows with some difficulty. He doesn’t know what to say. Doesn’t know how to explain without giving it all away. Wonders everyday why it matters. Because he trusts Sirius.

He does.

He does.

He does.

Except...

I was there too, in the office, when James said that Sirius smiled, when he told him what he'd done.

Remus shivers at the voice. At the memories. And he sees Sirius's brows draw together. Sees him reach out. "Re—"

"Remus!"

It's not a yell as much as a gush, like all the air flew out of her the moment she said his name. Remus and Sirius both turn to see Charlotte, holding Aileen's hand and walking towards them. Funny, Remus isn't sure he ever heard her say his name back at Lupercal. Truth be told, he wasn't even sure she'd remember him.

But not only does she remember, she's running towards him. It's instinct that has him bending down so that she can crash right into his arms. So that she can bury her little face in his neck.

"Aw look at that, precious," Aileen says, leaning against her desk.

Remus holds Charlotte close. "Hey," he says softly, at a loss for what else to do.

When she answers her voice is so quiet he barely hears it even though she's speaking right into his ear; "Are you taking me back?"

He has to close his eyes for a moment at the excitement in her voice. He's never wanted to lie to someone so badly.

"No," he says finally. "I'm sorry."

She snuffles and he's worried she's going to cry but all she does is nod against his neck and squeeze him tighter. With more effort than he would like to admit, Remus stands up with Charlotte in his arms, her legs wrapped around his waist.

"You've been given permission to take her off the grounds but we do require the children to be back by seven at the latest, so I'll ask you to be mindful of the time," Aileen explains, looking at them fondly. "Oh—and here's her jacket, I did try to get it on her, but she wasn't so sure she was going to want to leave with you. I daresay she's changed her mind though."

Sirius reaches out and takes the little pink jacket, thanking Aileen as Charlotte whispers: "I thought you might be him."

Greyback. She means Greyback.

Fuck.

He can't imagine what that would be like. Surrounded by a bunch of adults who can never make you feel safe because they can't be trusted with the truth. Remus remembers being afraid after the attack, remembers nights spent in his parent's bed. But at least they'd had wands. At least he'd known that they would fight Greyback if they saw him and not invite him over for tea.

"He isn't going to come here okay?" a promise Remus feels fairly certain he can make now that he's in Greyback's inner circle. Greyback has no interest in the children he turns until they're old enough to fight with him.

"Well," Sirius says, stepping closer, as Aileen returns to her desk. "Shall we go on an adventure?"

Charlotte turns her head to look at him, cheek still pressed to Remus's shoulder. He can feel the moment she sees him, sees his smile, and his dancing eyes, and his beautiful face. Sirius Black, the eighth wonder of the world.

"Hello sweetheart," he says. "Should we get your coat on?"

Remus isn't expecting her to speak, she did it so rarely on the farm. But then: "I'm too hot," she says in a soft voice.

"Ah," Sirius says wisely. "Like your uncle Moony then." Remus isn't sure if Sirius has figured out just how much that's true yet. He doesn't think so, based on the lightness of Sirius's voice.

"Moony?" Charlotte repeats curiously.

"Sorry, that's my nickname for Remus."

There's a pause and then. "I like Moony."

Sirius's smile is so bright that Remus has to look away.

"Me too."

It's a few seconds before Remus is able to find his voice again. "Charlotte this is Sirius, Sirius this is Charlotte."

Sirius makes a big dramatic bow that has Remus rolling his eyes. "M'lady."

Charlotte watches him for a moment before turning back to Remus and whispering in his ear: "Is he a prince?"

Remus has to bite the inside of his cheek to hold back a laugh, making eye contact with Sirius who is looking at him questioningly. "She wants to know if you're a prince," he explains.

"Ah, is it because of my incredible manners and regal presence?" he directs the question at Charlotte who considers him before shaking her head.

“It’s your hair.”

And now Remus can’t help it, he bursts out laughing, harder than he has in a while, Sirius breaking not a moment later.

“Alright, I like you, you can stay,” he reaches over and musses her hair and instead of telling him to shove off like Remus surely would have, she preens.

Remus does insist that she wear her jacket, Charlotte making little huffy noises the whole time he’s putting it on her, like she’s humouring him. Sirius does a terrible job of hiding his snickering.

“Alright Princess, how do you feel about piggybacks?” Sirius asks once she’s all zippered up.

“I like them,” Charlotte answers decisively.

“Good, me too.” Not a second later Sirius is kneeling on the floor, helping Charlotte clamour onto his back.

“So I was thinking we could go out for lunch,” Remus says as the three of them traipse outside. “There are some nice restaurants around here and then maybe we could, I don’t know, go to a park?” He’s not got very much experience with children, barely remembers being one himself, but he feels like food and open spaces are a pretty safe bet.

“I mean, we could do that,” Sirius says, in a voice that instantly has Remus narrowing his eyes. “Or…we could take her to the greatest sweet shop known to mankind.”

Charlotte makes a small excited squealing noise.

“We’re not taking her to Honeydukes.”

“Why not?” Charlotte is resting her chin on the top of Sirius’s head and Remus is trying very hard not to think about how adorable they look.

“Yeah why not?” Sirius mimics her tone as they stop just inside the front gates of the orphanage.

“It’s dangerous.”

Sirius arches his brow. “Literally how?”

And Remus doesn’t have an answer for him exactly, just that the thought of taking her so far and exposing her to so much FEELS dangerous.

“Exactly,” Sirius says, eyes looking up like he can see Charlotte through his skull. “You ever Apparated before kid?”

“Sirius—“

“Once, with mama.”

Sirius nods. “Okay good, so you know it’s going to feel a little wonky for a minute but you just have to hold on tight and breathe through it. Think you can do that?”

She nods her head, chin messing up his hair. “I’m strong.”

“Oh, I can tell.”

“Sirius.”

The other boy looks at him, something a bit more sincere in his expression than before. “Let’s give her some fun yeah?” He holds Remus’s eyes with all the intent of someone who was never given much fun himself.

And how can Remus say no to that?

“She doesn’t leave our sight,” he says instead of yes, Sirius offering him a hand that Remus reluctantly takes. “And we’ll have her back before seven.”

Sirius nods. “Cross my heart.”

Remus squeezes his hand before looking up at Charlotte who is bubbling over with excitement. Something he never saw at Lupercal. More time has passed since she was attacked, and that’s likely some of the reason that she’s thawed. But he also has no doubt that a bit of it is the magic of Sirius. Who when he looks at you, really looks at you, makes you feel like anything is possible if you want it bad enough.

A second later his feet are slamming down on the road just outside of Hogsmeade. Charlotte makes a little gasping noise when they turn towards the quaint town.

“It’s beautiful,” she whispers, and Remus can’t help but look at Sirius who is looking right back, smiling.

“Yeah,” Remus agrees. “Yeah it is.”

If her eyes went wide at the sight of the town, they nearly fall out of her head when they walk into Honeydukes. Sirius gracefully lets her slide off his back and onto the floor, Charlotte instantly grabbing his hand. Honestly Remus is feeling a little overwhelmed himself. The moment they walk into the colourful shop that smells like something warm and sweet and safe, he realizes he hasn’t been here since he left school.

For a moment his heart stutters. And he thinks he hears James laughing, sees Peter making a mad dash for the chocolate frogs, sees Sirius with that careless smile of his, hanging in the corner of his mouth. The worst thing in any of their lives is the potions essay they’re all pretending isn’t due the next day.

Remus lets out a shaky breath.

God he misses them.

Misses them so much some days he thinks it'll take him apart.

"This is a lot of sweets," Charlotte says, bringing Remus back to the present.

"True," Sirius nods his head soberly, "best to come up with a game plan," the three of them are still standing just inside the door, Charlotte and Sirius staring out at all that lies in front of them. "So where do you wanna start? Chocolate or candy?"

Charlotte seems to consider this quite seriously. "Candy," she decides.

Sirius grins. "Brilliant choice."

They end up needing a cart to hold everything Charlotte picks up as Sirius gives a rather informative tour of the shop. Remus thinks he must have studied the Honeydukes inventory harder than he ever studied for any class they took.

The tour finishes at the front counter where Charlotte is treated to a sample of about every fudge flavour imaginable and Remus is almost positive that he's going to be vanishing vomit before the day is done. By the time they leave the store Charlotte is practically vibrating, sprinting down the street when Sirius points out their next destination—Zonko's, of course.

"Stop at the corner!" Remus shouts after her, shaking his head as he looks down at the bags Sirius is holding. "I can't believe you bought all that."

"This? Please. I was holding back."

"And what exactly are we going to tell them when we take her home loaded up with sweets?"

"Pfft, we're not going to tell them about the sweets. Then they'll do something ridiculous like say she can't have them before supper or make her share them! God forbid."

Remus bites the inside of his cheek to keep from smiling. "You're a horrible influence."

"Aw, is someone feeling grumpy?" Sirius makes a pouty face. "Here, have a sugar quill, those always put you in a better mood back at school."

Remus can't help laughing now, giving Sirius a good shove. "You're such an as—" of course it's at that moment that Charlotte decides to turn back towards them. "As-bsolute jerk."

Sirius smirks, far too smug. "Nice one."

Zonko's is about as chaotic as Remus remembers. Noises and flashing lights and things disappearing in puffs of smoke. It has none of the "cuteness" of Honeydukes. Zonko's is much more of a "fend for yourself" kind of place, which of course James and Sirius always thrived off of. Luckily there aren't many people there today, which lessens the urge Remus

usually feels to get out as fast as possible. This is especially good since Sirius seems intent on taking his time.

“What are these?” Charlotte picks up a flat purple disk.

“Ah, you have good taste,” Sirius bends down, gently taking it out of her hand. “These, are wings,” with the swipe of his thumb a pair of child sized pixie wings sprout from either side of the disc, waving slowly in the air.

Charlotte gasps, her eyes growing wide as she stares at them. “Can you wear them?”

“Absolutely! This little guy goes in the middle of your back and then bam! You’ll be floating—what does it say...” he double checks the sign. “A whole three inches off the ground!”

“I’ll fly!” Charlotte’s voice has gone up several octaves.

Sirius smiles. “In a manner of speaking.”

Charlotte spins around, showing him her back. “Put it on! Put it on! Put it on!”

“Alright, bossy pants,” he reaches forward when suddenly she spins back, nearly toppling him over.

“Wait, not on my jacket! On my shirt!” she starts fumbling with her zipper.

“Woah, hey, it’s too cold for that. Why can’t you put the wings on your jacket?” Remus asks, though she already has the thing half-off.

“Fairies don’t wear jackets,” she says, like it’s a known fact. Remus resists the urge to tell her that these are not fairy wings.

Sirius helps her slide the jacket off and when Remus glares at him he shrugs. “Aw, c’mon Rem, I’ll cast a warming charm on her. Fairies don’t wear jackets, it’ll ruin the whole aesthetic.”

Remus rolls his eyes, “Fine.”

Sirius turns back to Charlotte who is bouncing impatiently on her toes, waiting for her wings. He freezes almost as soon as he looks at her, the smile sliding right off his face. Remus immediately steps forward, not understanding what’s happened until he sees that in the scuffle to get her jacket off Charlotte’s shirt has been pulled away from her neck. And there, on the skin of her shoulder, is a puckering scar.

Teeth.

Sirius turns to him, a question in his eyes that Remus can’t bare to answer out loud, so he just nods.

“Are they on?” Charlotte asks, trying to look back at them. For a moment Remus is worried that she’s going to know that something’s wrong but Sirius is nothing if not a performer.

“Just a second,” he says, expression wiped clean as he presses the circle between her shoulder blades. “There you go. Now you just have to wave your arms—just a little—and the wings will flap.”

She does, squealing and giggling when her feet start to lift off the ground.

“I’m flying! I’m flying!”

She’s barely hovering really, toes only just in the air as she bobs about, moving her arms like she’s swimming.

Sirius straightens up, standing next to Remus. “I think we’re gonna need to get her a broom.”

“Don’t you dare!”

Sirius only laughs.

“Hey!” Charlotte sort of front-crawls towards them.

“If you put your arms down you’ll be able to walk,” Sirius says with amusement. Charlotte very noticeably does not put her arms down.

“You need some too!” she says, looking up at him.

“I need some wings you mean?”

She nods her head vigorously.

“You know what,” Sirius pulls out his own purple disc. “I think you’re right.”

There are no words to describe the way that Remus’s heart swells, when five minutes later they walk out of the store with Sirius and Charlotte holding hands and sporting matching pixie wings. He wishes he had a camera, James would die.

They find a bench to sit down on, Charlotte floating around in little circles in front of them, endlessly entertained by her new toy. Remus leans into Sirius’s side.

“You’re good with her.”

Sirius snorts. “Helps that we’re mentally the same age.”

But Remus shakes his head. “No, I mean it. I’ve never seen her smile this much before. Never heard her laugh. It’s—you’re good at it.”

Sirius looks over at him, brow raised. “It?”

“Kids.”

Sirius is silent for a moment, a long moment, at least for him. He watches Charlotte fluttering around, his eyes distant. “I guess I just...know what I needed. What I wanted. When I was... a kid.”

It still feels odd to say that. To have “kid” be something they were not something they are. You spend so much of your youth trying to convince everyone that you’re grown, but the minute the world turns around and says “you, you’re an adult, you’re responsible” you can’t help but feel that a terrible mistake has been made.

Because to Remus, Sirius is still a kid.

Sometimes he’s even still trapped in that house.

He feels tugging on his sleeve and starts when he realizes that Charlotte is right next to him, her feet firmly on the ground for the first time since the wings went on.

“Hey, what’s up?” he asks her, bending down slightly.

She bites her lower lip. “I wanna...” she looks at Sirius and then back at Remus, lowering her voice. “I wanna see your wolf.”

Remus blinks. He hadn’t been expecting that, maybe he should have been but...

“I never see any anymore,” she goes on. “I miss them.”

Even with all the time he’s spent with Gabe recently it still feels so foreign to him, this affection for the wolf. Remus has never felt anything but shame and fear. He doesn’t want that for Charlotte.

“Rem?” Sirius says, bringing Remus’s attention back to him. “What did she ask?”

He opens his mouth and then closes it, not sure he can explain. Thankfully, he’s saved by Charlotte tugging on his sleeve again. This time she doesn’t stop until he’s bent low enough that she can whisper in his ear.

“Is he like us?”

Remus doesn’t know why that makes his breath hitch. Maybe because it’s his biggest fear. He can hear Regulus Black’s dead voice in his head: Haven’t bitten him yet then?

“No,” Remus finally manages, voice a little tight. “But he—he knows.”

She looks back at Sirius before nodding. “So you can show me then?”

Merlin, can he? He’s done it a few times since Lupercal—transformed on his own, or, well, by his own freewill. Gabe has always been there. Sometimes Gabe has bad days and he just needs...to escape. Originally Remus had suggested letting him see Charlotte but Dumbledore had denied that request. Incase somehow it lead to Gabe working out the relationship between Remus and Dumbledore and telling Greyback.

“Remus?” that’s Sirius again, looking at him pleadingly, expecting some sort of explanation that Remus isn’t sure he can give him.

Finally, after his eyes have done a circuit of the surrounding area, making sure no one is close enough to hear, Remus manages to make himself speak. “She wants to see my wolf.”

Sirius’s brows draw together, eyes bouncing between the pair of them, clearly trying to figure out if this is some sort of game. “But...it’s not even close to the full moon?”

“Why would that matter?” Charlotte responds before Remus gets the chance.

“I—“ Sirius lets out a shaky laugh, running a hand through his hair. “Sorry, I’m lost here. What are we talking about?”

Remus doesn’t think this is the place to explain. Before he can second guess himself he’s standing up and offering Charlotte his hand. Her eyes growing bright.

“Yeah?”

He nods. Short. Curt.

He’s nervous. Partially because it’s dangerous, and partially because Sirius is here. Is watching him. But he doesn’t want all of Mia’s hard work to be lost. He doesn’t want Charlotte to see a cell at the Ministry every time she thinks about this part of herself.

“Moons,” Sirius says, falling into step with them as they head out of town and towards the school. “What’s she talking about?”

His hands are trembling, and he feels Charlotte give the one she’s holding a squeeze. He’s being comforted by a five year old. He nearly laughs.

“I’m gonna show you,” Remus says finally.

Sirius scrutinizes him for a minute longer before nodding his head. “Alright.”

They don’t actually go to the school. Instead turning towards the forest that starts at the bottom of its grounds and stretches far beyond. He’s not going to take Charlotte to the Shrieking Shack. He expects it’s no better than a cell at the Ministry. He knows the forest isn’t generally considered a safe place, but he’s never been able to see the sinisterness that everyone else does. Some of the happiest moments of his life have happened between these trees.

Still, he keeps a firm hold on Charlotte’s hand, even when she tries to run off. While he might not be afraid of the forest like other people, that doesn’t mean he’s just going to hand it an unarmed five year old wearing pixie wings.

The whole time they walk Sirius shoots him nervous looks out of the corner of his eyes. For all that he loves springing them on other people, Sirius has never much liked surprises himself.

“Okay, this ought to be good,” Remus says as they come to a small clearing, far enough into the forest that no one passing by on the outside can see them.

“Good for what?” Sirius asks as Remus takes off his coat and jumper and folds them carefully on top of a nearby tree stump.

“Wolf! Wolf! Wolf!” Charlotte claps her hands, floating around again now that Remus is no longer anchoring her.

Sirius doesn’t bother responding to that, eyes on Remus who is a little worried he’s going to throw-up. Instead he steps forward, and before Sirius can ask another question he presses a quick kiss to his lips.

“Don’t be scared okay?” he says softly when he pulls away, Sirius’s eyes desperately searching his, likely not finding anything helpful.

Remus steps back, making sure there’s a good amount of space between him and the others. He notices Sirius moving closer to Charlotte and he tries not to take that personally. Exhaling he closes his eyes. He’s gotten better at this, the last few times, the walls in him coming down a little easier. Still, he’s more nervous this time, and it’s making it harder to concentrate.

“Re—“

“Shhh!” Charlotte silences him and Remus has to bite his lip to hold back a laugh.

It’s okay,

he tells himself.

It’s Sirius.

It’s only Sirius.

He exhales again, searching for the howl, the one that runs underneath his thoughts. His pulse. Always there. Steady. He tries to remind himself that it isn’t scary. That it’s just a part of him, like every other part. And then he pulls it forward. Makes it loud. As loud as it wants to be.

For a moment everything disappears.

And then it reforms and it is brighter and sweeter and realer.

“Holy shit.”

He blinks his eyes open and sees Charlotte’s beaming face, she runs towards him, Sirius making a grab for her.

He’s afraid.

Afraid.

Afraid of me.

“Charlotte don’t—“

Moony instantly lowers himself, dipping his head, trying to show that he’s not a threat.

They both smell so familiar.

Especially Sirius.

Pack, he thinks.

Pack.

and pack.

and pack.

Charlotte is scratching behind his ears, making his back leg thump in appreciation on the ground.

“You’re so cute,” she coos, and he likes that, so he licks her—slobber covering half her face and making her giggle.

“Sirius come—come pet him!”

Moony turns to Sirius.

Sirius who does not come.

And does not pet.

Unhappy with this he gets up, careful not to knock Charlotte over as he walks towards Sirius. It’s not until then that he realizes that there are tears in Sirius’s eyes. His beautiful eyes.

Beautiful.

Beautiful.

Beautiful.

Moony whines, it’s a desperately sad noise.

He doesn’t want Sirius to cry.

He does not want Sirius to ever cry.

“Sorry—Merlin—sorry, it’s just,” he wipes at his face, voice a little shaky. “I’ve never seen you...I’ve never seen you look so...so happy. I’ve never seen your wolf look...you’re just... God Remus I don’t know how to explain it. I didn’t know it could be like this.”

Moony nods, though he’s not sure that Sirius catches it, and he wants to hold him. To protect him. To sink his teeth into him and never let him go.

Instead he steps forward, knocking his nose into the centre of Sirius's chest, causing Sirius to laugh. He can hear his heart.

Thump,

thump.

thump.

"Hey, hi," Sirius says softly, petting him and then leaning forward and pressing several light kisses across his head. No one has ever kissed his wolf before. Something akin to a purr seems to grow from his chest.

Sirius chuckles. "You like that huh?" he kisses him a few more times for good measure, before pulling away, just staring. Moony stares back, not feeling any of the embarrassment he might normally.

Mine, he thinks.

He's mine,

mine.

mine.

"AHWOO!"

Both Sirius and Moony whip around at the noise, finding little Charlotte, floating in the centre of the clearing...howling. She looks at Moony and smiles.

"AHWOO!"

A second later he's joining her, head tilted back towards the sky, voice ripped from him like it's desperate to be free.

"C'mon Sirius," Charlotte says after a few seconds. "You have to sing too."

Moony turns back to him, worried he'll refuse, not sure why it's so important that he doesn't. There's a moments pause before Sirius's eyes find his. And then he howls. The noise shooting through Moony like an electric current. The sound vibrating in his chest.

The three of them sing.

Loud and proud and unafraid.

Pack.

Pack.

Pack.

Remus is able to patch his clothes back together with magic. He's still looking rough, but once he has his jumper and his coat back on it's not too bad. When he emerges from the trees he'd been hiding behind to make himself decent, he finds Charlotte no longer wearing her wings and instead sporting a little green backpack that Sirius is just zipping up.

When Sirius looks over at him Remus arches his brow; "You put an extension charm on that?" because there's no way all the stuff they bought today could fit inside there naturally.

Sirius nods, getting back to his feet. "And I'm gonna put a disillusionment charm on it before we get back to the orphanage, that way there will be no awkward questions."

"And I'll get to keep all my sweets!" Charlotte adds.

Sirius looks down at her fondly. "Exactly," he holds out his hand and she gives him a high-five without a moments hesitation.

Remus sighs. "Bad influence."

Their eyes meet.

"So you've said," and then something shifts in Sirius's gaze and he's stepping forward, wrapping Remus in his arms. It's one of those feel-it-in-your-bones kind of hugs. Sirius tucking his face into the crook of Remus's neck.

"Hey," Remus says softly.

"Hey," Sirius says back. And then; "Thanks...for showing me."

That makes Remus's heart tremble, and for a moment he has to close his eyes just to relieve one of his senses. He turns his head, kissing Sirius's temple. If he could, he would stay here forever. In this forest. In these arms. But unfortunately the world has not disappeared. And there is a rather sleepy looking toddler waiting for them.

Remus gives Sirius one last good squeeze before pulling back. "We should probably take her home," he gestures to Charlotte who chooses that moment to yawn.

Sirius nods, though he looks profoundly unhappy about it. "Alright you little menace," he says as he walks over to her, kneeling down and offering up his back. "All aboard."

By the time they make it up the walkway to the orphanage Charlotte can barely keep her eyes open.

"Someone looks like they've had a fun day," Aileen says when they walk through the door, Sirius carefully easing Charlotte off of him. She hugs his legs sleepily before moving on to

Remus, whose jumper she pulls until he brings his ear down for her.

“You’ll come back?” she whispers, causing Remus’s heart to squeeze.

“Yeah,” he clears his throat, “of course.”

Charlotte nods, very matter of fact, and then: “Bring Gabe too.”

“Okay little missy, your uncles have to go now, time to finish up your goodbyes.”

And Remus desperately wants to grab Charlotte and carry her out of there. Desperately wants to take her back to Lupercal. To give her the beautiful life she was going to have. But he can’t do any of that, so instead he hugs her one last time.

“I’ll try,” he whispers before she’s pulled away, waving at Sirius as she goes.

They don’t talk for a while. Walking out of the building and down towards the road in silence.

“So,” Sirius says eventually, the sun setting above their heads. “That bite…”

“Greyback,” Remus isn’t sure he wants to know how Sirius was going to finish that question. “Or one of his followers,” his stomach twists at the thought that right now that includes him.

“Bastard,” Sirius hisses, hands in the pockets of his jacket. “I swear to god I’m gonna kill him one day.”

Remus snorts even though he knows that Sirius isn’t joking, which means there is nothing remotely funny about it. “I’ll join you.”

Now it’s Sirius who’s laughing. “Fun new date night activity.”

“Jesus Christ,” but Remus is smiling despite himself.

“Murder is the key to a healthy relationship.”

“Pretty sure that’s communication.”

“Pretty sure you have to communicate to murder someone together.”

And now they’re both laughing, because they’re terrible people, because they’re children, because what else can you do? When the world is ugly and cruel, what else can you do but laugh?

They usually aren’t particularly affectionate in public, for a great many reasons, but when they sit down on the bus Remus can’t fight the urge to lean into Sirius, flicking his wand and casting a disillusionment charm over them. Sirius raises his brow but still sneaks an arm around Remus’s waist, pulling him closer.

“You ever think about it?” Remus asks after a few minutes. “Having kids?”

Sirius snorts. “You wanna have my babies Moony?”

Remus scoffs, turning his face and burying it in Sirius’s neck. He expects that to be the end of the conversation, but a few minutes later Sirius says:

“We can’t now, because everything is...well...a mess,” Remus wonders if he’s talking about the pair of them specifically or the war in general. Frankly, he’s too afraid to ask. “But later, when things are settled, safer, we’ll get her out of there.”

It takes Remus a pathetically long time to work out what Sirius is saying, and when he does he pulls back, staring at the other boy. “Charlotte?” he says. “You want to adopt Charlotte?”

“Well we can’t leave her there. Besides, James and Lily’s brat will need someone to keep it in line, you know that kid is gonna be an absolute terror,” Sirius grins.

But Remus is still struggling to process this. “But she—it’s hard, when you’re young, it would be—her being...what she is...it would be hard. Wouldn’t you rather...” a kid who isn’t already broken, he can’t say, doesn’t even mean. At least not about Charlotte. Given the choice his father would have. His mother too maybe.

“I reckon we can handle it, don’t you?”

And before Remus can stop himself he’s kissing him, “I love you,” he says when they break apart, staring into Sirius’s eyes.

And whatever had been there that morning, whatever sadness, whatever hesitation, whatever doubt—Remus doesn’t see it now.

“I love you too.”

Chapter End Notes

Hello beautiful people!

Is this an accurate portrayal of how orphanages work? No. But I ask you to suspend your disbelief so that we can read less about paperwork and more about Wolfstar being dads for the day!

I hope that the softer moments in this chapter were a nice little break from all the drama and angst, and if not, don't worry, the next three-ish chapters are ALL drama and angst (can you believe there are only three chapters left, like goddamn)

Thank you all so much! Sorry this update took a while again! I hope you're having a lovely day! :)

Chapter 53

Chapter Summary

Don't go to Troy

Chapter Notes

tw: referenced sexual assault

tw: referenced substance abuse (recovering from substance abuse)

tw: child abuse (via magic)

tw: Major Character Death (I feel like everyone is aware of this one at this point but, yeah, hey babes, we're here)

tw: suicide

In case it is still unclear at this point - this is an interpretation of canon

I tried to make his death more about closure than about, y'know, being scary and traumatic, like it's still scary but that isn't the focus

PART I REGULUS

Regulus sighs as he watches the sun rise outside his window.

Another night gone in a blur of faces and voices and moments he would rather forget.

It'll get better, he tells himself as he showers, as he does up the buttons of his shirt, as he wrestles his hair into something close to respectable. It'll get better. That's what people say right? People like James Potter and Remus Lupin and—well, he can't really see Sirius saying anything remotely like that but he must pretend when he's around them. Pretend to be the type of person who believes things get better. Regulus can't imagine it comes naturally to him. It's not how they were raised.

His hands twitch, wanting to pull open the mirror, to shut-up the guilt vibrating inside his skin. He grips the sink in front of him and drops his head, letting out a shaky breath.

He's trying.

But then, he still hasn't thrown them out—the potions.

He could.

He could get rid of them all. Maybe lessen the temptation. But he just can't quite bring himself to...what if he needs them? He's going to have to sleep at some point.

How does the saying go? No rest for the wicked?

Evan is right by his ear. Echoing in his head. Regulus's hands tighten around the sink. He tries to will the voice away, but even just doing that makes him feel guilty. He knows it isn't really Evan, he does. He hasn't completely lost it. But at the moment, it's the closest thing he has to him.

What d'you reckon your boyfriend will say huh? When you can't sleep without getting fucked-up? Or better yet, when you start calling out his parents' names? How exactly are you going to explain that?

Regulus is afraid that if he looks up he'll find Evan in the mirror. That if he sees his face, figment of his imagination or not, he'll crack. So he just keeps staring at the drain, nails scraping the porcelain.

"I'll tell him the truth," he manages finally.

He won't lie to James again. He won't repeat old mistakes. Regulus tried to push James away, tried to make James stop loving him, it didn't work. Not for either of them. And he isn't interested in trying again.

"I'll tell him the truth," he repeats, hoping that he means it.

You're a fool if you think he'll be able to get over that.

Maybe, but Regulus reckons, of all the things he has to live with, being foolish is probably the easiest.

It's another few minutes before he's able to let go of the sink and walk away. He should feel good. Triumphant. He didn't take the potions. Didn't open the cabinet. He isn't sure that he does exactly, but there's something—some little tickle just beneath his ribs. Something that if he waters and feeds it and gives it a bit of sun, might just blossom into good.

Kreacher is waiting for him in the kitchen, sliding a loaded plate towards him as he sits down at the table. Sometimes he thinks about how his mother used to snap at him for spending time in here. Acting common. He takes some satisfaction in knowing that this isn't her house anymore and he can spend his time wherever the fuck he pleases.

Regulus feels Kreacher's eyes on him as he shovels eggs into his mouth and when he looks up he sees the house elf with tears in his eyes.

"Kreacher?" he asks, concerned.

Kreacher snuffles, before offering him a watery smile. "You is eating sir, and I is not even having to throw things."

Regulus snorts. “It’s really good Kreacher, thank you.”

Another sniffle, Kreacher using the dishtowel in his hands to dry his eyes. “I will be making it all the time if you will be liking it.”

Regulus feels his throat grow tight. He isn’t sure if it’s real, the care that Kreacher shows him, or if he can’t help it. Part of his obligation to their family. Isn’t sure he wants to know.

“Thank you,” he manages eventually, before putting him and Kreacher both out of their misery and turning back to his breakfast—saving them from anymore emotional outbursts.

It’s nice, being able to taste his food, even if he’s still feeling a little unsteady—his stomach and head prone to aching, his skin hotter than is comfortable. He isn’t worried. He knows these potions well. Knows what withdrawal looks like. He’s just hoping no one else does.

“Fuck!”

Regulus drops his fork as a sharp burning pain shoots up his arm.

“Master Regulus what is being the matter?”

By the time Regulus is rolling his sleeve back, he already knows what it is—what it has to be. And there, on his arm, is the snake wiggling inside its skull, glowing bright green.

“Fuck,” he hisses again, a little more controlled this time.

“But you is not being finished your breakfast yet!” Kreacher complains, sounding genuinely upset. It’s almost enough to make Regulus smile. Unfortunately, there’s already a sick feeling creeping up on him, threatening to make him vomit the food he has eaten.

“Keep it warm for me, yeah?” he manages, clearing his throat so he doesn’t sound quite so scared. “I’ll eat it when I get back.”

He knew this was coming, of course. That after the dust had settled, and the wounds had been licked, they would have to come back together. To figure out their next move after the disaster that occurred at the Ministry. But god he’s been dreading it.

“Is Mister Lucius going to be being there sir?” Kreacher asks as Regulus heads towards the front door, the mark on his arm begging to take him away, to Apparate to its master, unable to do so within the house’s wards.

“Yeah,” Regulus says, happy that his voice comes out steady this time. “I expect so.”

“Good,” Kreacher hands him his jacket as they get to the entryway. “Perhaps if he be seeing you he will be leaving the house alone. It is most destructive when he calls.” Lucius has broken several vases (Regulus was not aware they had so many) in his attempts to get Regulus’s attention. It has not endeared him to Kreacher.

“Yeah,” Regulus says noncommittally. “Maybe.”

“I will be keeping your breakfast warm!” Kreacher announces, as though worried that Regulus might think he’s forgotten.

Regulus opens the door, throwing the elf a weak smile over his shoulder, “Thanks Kreacher.” He’s barely on the front stoop before the magic in his arm is pulling him away. He can resist it of course, but when he doesn’t, the Dark Lord is able to call him wherever he pleases.

It’s not a surprise when he finds himself on the front lawn of Malfoy Manor, an angry peacock glaring at him as though he’s just personally offended it. He stumbles, the landing not as smooth as it would’ve been had he chosen the destination himself. He stares up at the ugly house in front of him and sighs.

This should be fun.

“Well, well, well.”

He’s barely crossed the threshold into the marble entryway when Lucius’s voice finds him. He’s lurking in the shadows, clearly waiting for Regulus, leaning against the wall just under the stairs. He’s wearing an expensive suit, his hair long enough that he’s started braiding it.

“I didn’t think you’d show,” he leers. “The way you’ve been hiding.”

“Good morning to you too,” Regulus says flatly, not stopping on his way to the drawing room. He has no desire to engage in anything with Lucius.

“Oh come now Regulus, what’s the rush?”

Click.

Click.

Click.

Healed shoes on marble floors. Regulus thinks that noise will make him shiver for the rest of his life.

“The Dark Lord has summoned us,” he replies diplomatically.

Lucius snorts. “Well look who’s an eager little beaver. But then, I guess you were always something of a teacher’s pet weren’t you? Desperate to please.”

It takes a great deal of effort not to whip around and punch him.

The drawing room is just coming into view when Lucius grabs hold of Regulus’s arm and yanks him to a stop. A sickening feeling rocks through Regulus as he pulls himself free.

“Don’t. Fucking. Touch me.” He rounds on the older man, wand already in his hand.

Lucius laughs. “Are you going to curse me Regulus? Really?”

Regulus doesn’t move. It’s a bluff, he hates that it’s a bluff, but he can’t really fight Lucius. He’s respected too much. By everyone, but most importantly, by Voldemort. And Lucius knows it.

The older man steps forward, still smiling, allowing the tip of Regulus’s wand to poke his sternum. “Go on,” he hisses, “do it,” and when Regulus still doesn’t move; “You know, they’re looking for a traitor in there,” he nods towards the drawing room. “Trying to figure out who sold our secrets to the Aurors,” he leans slightly forward and it takes everything in Regulus not to flinch. Somehow he still feels trapped even though he’s the one with his wand raised. “I’ve already told the Dark Lord my money’s on you. So go on sweetheart, prove me right.”

Regulus grits his teeth, hands shaking. “What the hell do you want from me?”

That only makes Lucius’s smile grow. “What do I want? I would have thought that was obvious,” vicious, hungry. “I want you on your fucking knees.”

Funnily enough, all he can think about is Bellatrix. Casting the Imperious on him. Making him crawl around like a dog.

The pathetic part. Is once upon a time he really did think they loved him.

“Black.”

He spins around to find Snape holding open the door to the drawing room, gaze cold, though surprisingly, not directed at Regulus.

“Come on,” Snape says after a brief pause, “you’re late.”

“Me and Regulus were actually just having a chat,” Lucius says, his manners brittle. “So if you don’t mind—“

“I mind,” Snape interrupts. “Black, lets go.” His tone is so blank that it’s hard to fully appreciate what this is.

A rescue.

Regulus doesn’t need to be told twice, slipping his wand back into its holster and heading towards the room without a backwards glance. He can’t quite bring himself to thank Snape, but he pauses at the door, the pair of them locking eyes for just a moment. Some sort of understanding passing between them. He isn’t doing this for Regulus, of course. Still couldn’t give a shit about him, just like in school.

This is about Snape’s mum.

About what he could never do for her.

Doesn’t mean Regulus isn’t still grateful.

He nods his head in recognition. Snape, surprisingly, nodding back. And then the moment passes, and Regulus is walking into the room, the door slamming behind him. Lucius left in the hall.

It takes the wind out of Regulus when his eyes scan the table in front of him and find Barty sitting alone. His feet stuttering as he walks towards him. It's funny how much space one person can take up without you even realizing it. But everything feels emptier without Evan. Smaller.

Regulus slides silently into the seat next to Barty, trying to ignore the empty chair beside him. At least, until he notices the one across the table, and then a few more a little further down.

"A lot of people are missing today," Regulus says under his breath as he counts heads, trying to work out who's not there.

Barty nods. "Dead."

Regulus's eyes snap to him. "Dead?" he runs through the empty spaces again. "That's too many."

He doesn't know if he'll have to explain but Barty seems to understand. "Not all of them died at the Ministry. Some died after," he looks at Regulus now. "Suspected traitors."

A deep feeling of unease grips Regulus's stomach. Partially, because he is a traitor, and partially, because he knows Lucius has been going around telling people so. He can't help but wonder why he hasn't been called on, eyes going automatically to where Snape is sitting at the other end of the table. He wonders if Severus's word really carries that much weight with the Dark Lord—that one positive review has shielded Regulus from all this fallout.

At that moment the doors open, Voldemort walking in with Lucius trailing behind him. With the flick of his wrist the heavy curtains pull closed, blocking out the natural light and plunging them into the shadowy glow of the candelabras.

"Good morning my friends," Voldemort says as he reaches the head of the table, Lucius taking his place at his side. Voldemort's eyes run over each and every one of them, a sense of unease growing with every second he doesn't speak. It starts at their ankles and then creeps up—their calves, their thighs—until it's wrapping around their chests.

"We have much to discuss today."

The Ministry was a hollow victory for Dumbledore. At least, that is how Lucius sees it. And Bellatrix. Rodolphus. The government still has little to no power, Death Eaters have still managed to insinuate themselves into almost all the departments, Muggle Borns have still been forced out of all positions of influence.

The Aurors are being run ragged by Moody and he is slowly losing their support. So far it's been the hardest bastion of power for the Death Eaters to penetrate, but now? People are

tired. They're worn down. And Alastor Moody has no sympathy for them. But the Dark Lord does. Endless supplies of sympathy, if that's what it takes to get them to switch sides.

It's only a matter of time says Lucius. Bellatrix. Rodolphus—all the other bobbleheads surrounding the Dark Lord. Regulus doesn't know how true that is. Secretly he hopes they're all full of shit.

"I would ask one more thing before we part today," Voldemort says after nearly two hours. Regulus's head feels stuffy, his mouth and eyes dry. He can't wait to get the hell out of this place. "I have a task of great importance to complete—"

"I will happily take on any task you need my lord," Lucius interrupts, causing Regulus to roll his eyes. He can practically hear Evan—not the voice that's been haunting him, but the real Evan—muttering under his breath about what a fucking swot Lucius is. Nudging Regulus with his elbow and smirking.

Voldemort gives Lucius a dismissive look. "Yes, thank you for your enthusiasm Lucius, but I will be performing this task on my own," that causes Regulus to sit up. The Dark Lord rarely gets his hands dirty, always sending one of his many willing followers to do the work for him. And if he does go, he has a constant guard, a shadow of people willing to throw themselves in harm's way to protect him. So what could be so important that he's doing it alone?

Regulus feels his pulse speed up. It's a long-shot, he knows it's a long shot, knows it's wishful thinking but—

"I will be needing a house elf," the Dark Lord goes on. "I was wondering if any of you would be willing to lend me the use of one of your servants?"

"I will," Regulus nearly jumps out of his seat, Lucius with his mouth half-open, ready to offer the same. As the heads at the table all swivel in his direction Regulus clears his throat, trying to compose himself. "It would be an honour," he goes on, "to be able to serve your lordship in such a way."

Lucius is glaring at him, not one to take kindly to being outdone. They all wait for Voldemort to speak, but the Dark Lord appears to be in no hurry, watching Regulus without any concern for what is generally considered good manners. Regulus does his best not to squirm, not to drop his gaze.

And then...the older man smiles. Well, in a manner of speaking. "Thank you Regulus," he says, teeth on display. "Your devotion is most appreciated."

"Of course."

He'll Floo Cerci when he gets home, they'll come up with a plan, figure out how to use this to their advantage, maybe give Kreacher a list of things to look out for.

"I will be needing the elf now," Voldemort goes on, putting a stop to Regulus's planning and making him wonder if he needs to work on his Occlumency.

“Now?” he asks, sounding alarmed even to his own ears. “As in...this very moment...my lord?”

Voldemort arches his brow, seeming almost amused. “Will that be a problem?”

Regulus swallows. “No, no of course not. I’ll—I’ll go get him.” If he can just get home then maybe he can still prepare Kreacher.

“Surely you can just summon him here? I would hardly want to inconvenience you with the unnecessary trips back and forth.”

Regulus’s throat feels incredibly dry. This is happening too fast, he hasn’t had enough time to think this through. But if this has anything to do with the Horcrux, then they might never get this chance again.

“Of course, how kind of your lordship,” he finally manages to get out, nodding his head stiffly.

Voldemort smiles again. In that way he does. That way that feels like a threat. “Excellent,” then, looking around the table, “the rest of you are free to go.”

“See you,” Barty says briskly, barely looking at Regulus as he gets out of his seat. Others have gotten up as well, some leaving as quickly as Barty, some milling about. Lucius is currently in hushed conversation with Rodolphus and Bellatrix, dirty looks being cast in Regulus’s direction.

Regulus desperately wants a few moments alone with Kreacher but he’s not sure how to manage that without quite obviously disobeying the Dark Lord’s order. Because, however politely put, it was an order. Sighing, Regulus pulls out his wand and a second later a silver stag appears at his side, drawing some eyes and making Regulus’s heart ache a little.

Not in a bad way.

Just—he’ll never look at Boo and not see James now.

But it’s not in a bad way. How could it be?

“Kreacher,” he speaks, quietly and quickly, “you are needed in the drawing room of Malfoy Manor immediately,” I’m sorry, he thinks but doesn’t dare say, nodding at Boo to go.

A second later Boo is nothing but a streaming white light bounding out of the room. Regulus scrubs at his face as he tries to convince himself that he hasn’t just made a colossal mistake. Because he actually has no idea what Voldemort wants a house elf for. What if it has nothing to do with the Horcrux at all? What if he’s just volunteered Kreacher for something awful for no reason?

He runs his hands through his hair, fingers getting caught in his curls. This is a bad idea. He got overly excited at the prospect of a lead—they haven’t had many of those. Or any. Other than their tentative theory that Voldemort is Tom Riddle, and that the Horcrux might be

related to Salazar Slytherin, him and Cerci haven't been able to come up with anything. And they're running out of time.

There's a loud crack beside his chair, causing Regulus to sit up straight, a new bolt of anxiety rushing through him now that Kreacher is here.

"Is Master Regulus being unwell?" Kreacher steps forward, eyes doing a quick circuit of Regulus's body, looking for injuries.

"No I—I'm fine. Listen," he turns in his chair so that he's facing Kreacher properly, his back to the head of the table. The rest of the room has largely emptied out.

"I need—I'm so sorry Kreacher—but I need to ask something of you, something that's not fair."

"Regulus," calls out a high, cold voice, "is that your elf?"

He does his best not to grimace. "Yes, my lord," he says over his shoulder.

"Well then, by all means, bring him here."

"Of course," he turns back to Kreacher.

"Master?"

"Whatever happens," Regulus says in a desperate whisper. "Whatever happens you come back okay? Whatever he says to you, wherever he takes you, whatever he—" his voice cracks, "he does to you. You come back home okay? That's an order."

Kreacher looks at him quizzically. "Of course, I is always being coming back to you sir."

Regulus doesn't know what to say to that, to the sincerity in his voice. He squeezes his eyes shut.

"Master is you sure you is being—"

"Regulus, lets not keep the Dark Lord waiting. You're being rude," Bellatrix shouts across the room. It takes a huge effort for him not to snap back at her.

"Okay, okay," he opens his eyes, finding Kreacher's concerned gaze still on him. "Come with me."

It feels like it takes an obscenely long time for him to get to the other end of the table, the eyes of all the people waiting burning into him.

"My lord," he dips his head when he finally gets there, Voldemort sitting back in his chair, reminding Regulus disturbingly of James. The cockiness, the ease—of a person used to being admired. "This is Kreacher. He will be happy to serve you anyway he can," the words nearly choke Regulus on the way out of his mouth.

Voldemort gives Kreacher a cursory look, Kreacher instantly bowing.

“It would be my greatest honour to make the Black family proud by serving the Dark Lord,” he mutters largely to the floor, as though he is not even worthy of looking at Voldemort.

“Aw, what a good wittle boy he is,” Bellatrix is hanging off of Rodolphus, pointed chin hooked over his shoulder. She’s speaking about Kreacher but she’s looking at Regulus, grinning. His nails bite into the palms of his fists.

“You may go,” Voldemort’s voice brings Regulus’s attention back to him.

“My lord?”

Voldemort waves his hand. “Thank you for your elf, you are dismissed now.”

“Run a long and play with your friends Regulus,” Lucius says, eyes sharp. “Let the adults talk.”

This is a mistake.

He can’t leave Kreacher here.

Can’t leave him at the mercy of these people.

This is a mistake.

As if he can hear his thoughts, Kreacher speaks in a quiet voice. “I will be being alright Master Regulus, I is most happy to do this for you. For Mistress Black. She will be proud I think.”

A mistake.

A mistake.

A mistake.

“Yeah,” he croaks. “Yeah she’ll be proud.” If Walburga Black has ever considered Kreacher for longer than two seconds at a time Regulus would be shocked. “I’ll see you soon okay?”

Kreacher nods. “Yes sir.”

And what else is there after that?

Regulus’s feet feel like they’re made of lead as he walks away. Heavy and sinking and desperate to stand still. He looks back once, when he gets to the door, sees Kreacher standing at the side of Voldemort’s chair, ignored.

You’re good at this huh?

Evan’s hand on his shoulder. Breath on his neck.

Leaving people behind?

Regulus barely makes it home before the panic attack starts.

PART II SIRIUS

Sirius wakes up alone.

It's not so bad.

He's used to it.

At least that's what he tells himself.

He spends a long time in bed, staring at the ceiling, trying to convince himself to get up. Get dressed. Drink some water. The idea of just going back to sleep is tempting. Of just staying in bed until Remus comes home. Whenever that is. He pulls the covers up over his head, wrapping them around himself, pouting even though no one's there to see it.

Sometimes he pictures their dorm room back at Hogwarts. He tries to remember every detail—every scratch in the wall, every fingerprint on the window, every sock lost under the bed. He closes his eyes and imagines listening to Peter and James bicker about Quidditch, to Remus telling them off for getting distracted from their coursework. He imagines the sly ways Remus used to look at him, used to touch him, especially in those last two years. Back when they really shouldn't have but they just couldn't help it.

The brush of a pinky finger.

The press of a thigh.

The hug that went on just a bit too long.

He imagines sitting in the Great Hall. Pictures it perfectly—every table, every banner, the noise and chaos. Remus next to him, James laughing at something Marlene's just said. Lily and Peter playing chess, Mary people watching.

Eventually, his imagining turns into dreaming, as he falls back asleep even though he told himself he wouldn't.

When he wakes up he's still alone.

No bickering. No touches. No noise.

It's not so bad.

He's used to it.

At least that's what he tells himself.

“Sorry I’m late,” he says as he slides into the seat across from Alice forty-five minutes after he was supposed to be there. “Slept in.”

Most people would be pissed, but Alice just gives him a bemused smile, reaching over and mussing his hair. “Yeah, I can tell.”

“Hey!” he slaps her hand away. “I ran a comb through it.”

She arches her brow, causing Sirius to roll his eyes.

“Well, I thought about running a comb through it.”

Alice snorts. “That sounds about right.”

They’re having lunch at a restaurant Alice picked, Muggle as far as Sirius can tell. That in itself is a bit suspicious. Not that they never go to Muggle places, but usually their number one draw is that you’re unlikely to be overheard.

“Been here before?” Sirius asks casually, as he pulls the menu towards himself. He smiles when he sees that they’re still serving brunch.

“Once or twice,” Alice shrugs, before quickly changing the subject. “So, how’ve you been?” she kicks him gently under the table. “Feel like I haven’t seen you in ages.”

“Well, that’s because you’re a big important Auror lady now,” he puts the menu down, looking up at her. “You’ve forgotten all about us little people.”

“Oh please, as if I could ever forget about my first crush.”

Sirius laughs out loud, the noise coming right from his chest. “Alice Longbottom you’re a dirty liar.”

“What? Me? How rude of you to even suggest such a thing,” she gives him an impish smile, Sirius merely needing to arch a single eyebrow to make her crack. “Oh alright, fine, my first crush was actually Morgan Dubas, but you were a close second.”

“The lead Chaser for Yorkshire?”

Alice lets out a dreamy sigh. “He was very good with a Quaffle, and those hands—god, they were just...so...big.”

“Merlin Alice, there are children around,” Sirius teases, clutching his imaginary pearls.

“And since when do you care about being family friendly?”

They’re only joking. He doesn’t know why it reminds him of Remus, why he hears his voice so clearly in his head: “You ever think about it? Having kids?” The empty flat waiting for him makes the memory sting. Makes him pause just long enough for Alice to notice.

Rookie mistake.

“Listen,” he presses on quickly. “I’m just trying to prepare you for your future as a respectable mum,” he looks very pointedly at her belly.

“Who said anything about respectable?” her eyes twinkling. “I’m going to be a fun mum. No rules, no bedtimes, and ice cream for dinner!”

Sirius laughs, “Frank is going to have a fucking stroke.”

But Alice only smiles. “He knows what he signed up for.”

The waitress comes by and takes their orders, Sirius asking for just about everything off the brunch menu, including the bottomless mimosas. Alice gives him a look after the waitress leaves.

“You know I can’t have any of those right?” she asks.

“Good, cause I hate sharing.”

Alice only shakes her head. “Brat.”

They talk a bit about work but not much. Alice can’t say anything really. No one can these days. But he gets the gist of it; everyone is tired, everyone is scared, nothing is getting any better. In fact, what no one seems to want to outright say, not even Alice, is that things are undeniably getting worse. They’re losing this war. And no one seems to know how to stop it.

“So,” Sirius says, once they’ve finished their food and he’s on his third drink. “What is this really about then?”

Alice’s eyes go wide and she gasps dramatically, hand flying to her chest. “What? A girl can’t just ask a handsome young man to lunch without having some ulterior motive?”

Sirius arches his brow, taking a sip of his mimosa and waiting. The smile eventually slips from Alice’s face.

“Oh,” he says, placing his glass down, “this IS serious then?”

She sighs, leaning forward, resting her arms on the table. “Yeah,” she says eventually. “Yeah a bit.”

Sirius doesn’t know what to say to that so he just waits, the restaurant carrying on around them—muted chatter, clinking glasses, waiters maneuvering between tables. When a good five minutes has passed and Alice still hasn’t said anything he reaches his foot out and nudges her’s under the table.

“Hey Alice, you’re scaring me a little over here.”

He sees her grimace. “Sorry that’s—that’s the opposite of what I wanted to do I just...I’m not exactly sure how to tell you what I...what I have to tell you.”

“Well,” he says slowly. “Why don’t you just start and I’ll let you know when I need you to stop?”

She bites down on her lower lip, holding his gaze. “Okay,” she exhales. “Okay, so…” running a hand over her face. “You remember, a couple weeks ago, the attack on the Ministry?”

“Yeah, ‘course?”

She nods. “Well, me and Frank were there. And…you know, maybe you already know this and now I’ve just made this a whole thing and it doesn’t even—“

“Alice,” he cuts off her babbling. “Just tell me okay?”

She swallows. “Right. So me and Frank were there. But—um—but so was Remus.”

There’s a beat of silence. Sirius just staring at her, forehead wrinkling.

“I don’t understand. Like…with the Aurors?”

“So he didn’t—he didn’t tell you?” she asks tentatively.

Something like dread has started to fill the pit of Sirius’s stomach. “Tell me what? That he was there with you guys? No. No he didn’t.”

Alice looks slightly pained. “He—he wasn’t there with us,” she’s lowered her voice, leaning closer to Sirius, eyes darting around the restaurant, like she’s afraid of being overheard even here. “He was there with Greyback.”

The dread grows, crawling up his esophagus, crawling into his chest, burning his throat. “No,” Sirius finally manages. Because everything he knows about Remus, everything he has known about him since they were both eleven years old, rebels against that idea. He’d thought maybe Remus was working with werewolves. Maybe. But never Greyback.

Alice reaches across the table, squeezing his hand. “Listen, hey, Sirius? Listen to me. I’m sure it’s Order business okay? We know that Dumbledore’s been sending him somewhere—I’m sure this is it.”

Sirius nods, feeling numb. “Have you talked to Moody—he would know wouldn’t he?”

She frowns. “He won’t tell me anything, won’t tell anyone anything anymore. He’s completely paranoid. Honestly I’m a little worried…” she shakes her head. “Not the point. Look, I wouldn’t even have brought it up except—except he seemed, god how do I say this—the way he was acting with the other werewolves it felt…close. The way they fought together, protected one another, touched each other—“

“Touched each other?”

Alice rolls her eyes. “He wasn’t snogging anyone in the middle of the Atrium Sirius but it didn’t feel—“ she lets out another breath, squeezing his hand. “Look, I’ve known Remus for

a long time. I know what it looks like when he cares about people and...and this didn't seem like acting to me."

Pins and needles prick across Sirius's skin as he struggles to maintain some semblance of composure.

"So what are you saying?" he asks finally.

Alice's eyes are pitiful. "I'm saying...sometimes, when people go undercover, they get sucked in. They get attached. I'm saying...I think maybe, however his involvement with Greyback started, there's a chance he's—he's in too deep."

"Deep enough that he's feeding him information about us?" Sirius asks.

She squeezes his hand. "No—I—at least not on purpose. I don't believe he would ever put any of you in danger on purpose."

"On purpose," Sirius repeats.

"If he's grown to trust them it's possible that he's...sharing more than he should. But that doesn't mean—" she stops, looking at him for a long moment before she continues. "Talk to him okay? Just...I think you need to talk to him."

Sirius shakes his head. "He won't talk to me. Won't tell me anything. Hasn't for months."

"Then maybe—god I hate that I'm even saying this—but then maybe be careful what you tell him okay? For your own sake."

Sirius pulls away, pressing the heels of his hands into his eyes. "Fuck," he hisses. "Fuck I hate this."

"I'm sorry."

He laughs. "Not your fault, at least you're...talking to me," he drops his hands. He feels exhausted. Exhausted by the constant back and forth, by the uncertainty, by being so desperately in love with someone and so fucking terrified that you've got it all wrong. Because he's gotten it all wrong before. And he doesn't trust himself. Doesn't trust his judgement. He never has. But he's always trusted Remus's.

"Sirius, hey, Sirius, look at me?" Alice says gently, and eventually he does. "Whatever is happening here, whatever is going on with him, I don't believe for a second that he's doing anything he thinks would hurt you. People get turned around, especially these days, but Remus loves you. He loves all of you."

My dad loves me, Sirius almost says. He's glad he doesn't. Not sure he could explain to her what he means. Not sure he could explain how little being loved really matters in the end.

When Sirius gets home the flat is still empty. Still quiet. He stands for a long time just inside the door, staring out at the place he's made his home. Different in every way to Grimmauld. And in every corner, of every room, he sees pieces of Remus. His books, his mugs, his jumpers and blankets and records.

He walks down the hall and into the bedroom, climbs back into bed, pulls the covers around him and tries to get his thoughts to still. Tries to make them stop thinking about all the conversations he and Remus have had about what happened at the Ministry. How he never mentioned he'd been there. Acted just as surprised about it as all the rest of them. Sat there and lied to Sirius's face so well that he never suspected a thing.

He doesn't want to think about the other day either. About going to visit Charlotte. About whether or not that was all far more sinister than it appeared. About whether or not it had been Greyback who sent them to check up on her—Remus never did say who the letter was from.

He curls further in on himself, burrowing deeper into the blankets.

Shut up.

Shut up.

Shut up.

But it's so fucking quiet.

And he's so fucking alone.

And his thoughts are so loud.

It's bad.

It's bad.

And Remus isn't there to make it better.

PART III REGULUS

He doesn't know what to do with himself. He paces around the house, thinks about firecalling Cerci, but he knows that she's at work. It's probably for the best, he doesn't even have anything to tell her really, nothing's happened. He realizes he never even asked Voldemort how long he would be taking Kreacher for. It could be days, it could be weeks.

Fuck he's such an idiot.

He ends up in the kitchen, the part of the house that feels the safest, he makes tea because it's one of the only thing he knows how to do on his own. He finds his breakfast still waiting for him. Still under a warming charm, ready to be eaten. Looking at it makes his stomach lurch.

He hadn't been thinking, too focused on maybe, finally, getting closer to the Horcrux—he hadn't been thinking about what he was actually agreeing to.

He leaves his lukewarm tea behind and retreats to his bedroom.

He stares at the newspaper clippings on his wall like they will suddenly provide the answers they have failed to for the last few weeks. Like suddenly he'll know exactly where Voldemort has taken Kreacher and he'll—what? Show up? Tell the Dark Lord he's changed his mind and whisk Kreacher away? He sighs, scrubbing at his face before he starts to pace again.

One end of the room to the other.

One end of the room to the other.

One end of the room to the—well, you get the point.

Hours pass.

The day a fleeting thing, flickering and going out, quickly turning into evening, drifting towards night. Eventually Regulus gives up on his pacing, sitting down at his desk with a quill and piece of parchment. He'll write Cerci, tell her what's happened so far. If he calls she'll just come over—I mean, she'll probably come over anyway but at least this way he gets to tell himself that she's the needy one and not the other way around.

He presses the tip of his quill to the page—

Crack.

Regulus jumps, hand automatically grabbing the letter in front of him like it's something he needs to hide. He spins around and finds Kreacher on the floor. He's on his hands and knees, gasping for air and soaking wet. Regulus is instantly at his side.

“Kreacher? Kreacher, are you alright—shit, Kreacher?” the elf is shaking and muttering to himself. Regulus lifts his wand only to realize it's not a wand but his quill. Rolling his eyes he stuffs it in his pocket along with the parchment he's still clutching for some godforsaken reason. The second he has his wand out he dries and warms Kreacher who sags with relief, looking like he's ready to collapse onto the floor.

“Kreacher what happened?”

The house elf's eyes are panicked, looking at Regulus and then away, darting all over the room. Regulus reaches out to place a hand on his shoulder and Kreacher instantly flinches back, causing Regulus to freeze. For a moment the pair just stare at one another, both looking frightened.

“I is—“ Kreacher hiccups. “I is sorry I do not mean to be being so—“ another hiccup, maybe it's a sob but Regulus can't quite handle that, so he does with it what he does with everything he can't handle—pretends it doesn't exist. “So uncouth, is not proper for a house elf to be in such a—a state,” Kreacher struggles to get to his feet.

“Hey wait, Kreacher it’s okay, it’s okay,” he holds his hands out but doesn’t touch him, doesn’t try to help, it’s clear that Kreacher doesn’t want him to. “Why don’t you—here, sit on the bed yeah? Lie down?”

This only makes Kreacher more upset, already shaking all over, he backs away from Regulus on unsteady legs. Like he’s scared.

He’s never been scared of me before, Regulus thinks numbly. He stays on the ground, stays on his knees, hoping somehow that will help.

“I cannot use Master’s bed!” Kreacher’s voice cracks, looking back at Regulus in absolute horror. “It would be disgraceful—no respectful elf would ever—I cannot degrade the house of Black in such a way. I serve. I wish to serve. I will serve no matter what. No matter what. I will do my duty.” He’s crying. And Regulus doesn’t know what to do. He’s never seen Kreacher cry before. Not really. Not like this.

“It’s okay,” he says, bereft of anything else. “It’s okay. You’re a good elf. You—you’re so good.” Fuck. Fuck. What has he done? What has he done. “I’m so sorry—I’m so sorry Kreacher. I shouldn’t have made you go with him.”

He’s trying.

He’s trying to be a better person.

He doesn’t know why he can’t get it right.

“I is be doing whatever my Master is needing me to do,” Kreacher says in a voice that shakes, doing his best to pull his shoulders back, to stand straight, even while he snuffles, tear tracks clear on his face.

“I’m sorry,” because there’s nothing else.

Well, almost nothing else.

Regulus grits his teeth. “Kreacher I—can you tell me? Can you tell me what happened? Can you tell me where he took you? What he—what he did?” Regulus is still on the floor, sitting back on his heels, making him and Kreacher the same height. Kreacher might even be taller.

The house elf shivers. “It—I is—“ he stops, one thin hand coming to the base of his neck and holding there. He looks so frightened. Regulus has seen Kreacher take the brunt of his mother’s anger many times without even blinking. Whatever Voldemort did...

“If you can’t talk about it that’s—“ but Kreacher shakes his head, cutting Regulus off.

“Master Regulus wishes to know so I is be telling him,” he says, sounding angry with himself. He breathes out, determination in his eyes. “He is taking me—taking me to a cave sir.”

“A cave?” Regulus crosses his legs, listening like a little kid being told a bedtime story.

Kreacher nods. “And there was—was a potion,” another shiver. “He is be making Kreacher drink it. It—“ he seems at a loss for words, eyes haunted.

“Did it hurt you?” Regulus doesn’t know why he’s whispering.

Kreacher blinks, as if coming back—back to Grimmauld, to the present, to Regulus. “Yes,” he says after a moment. “It hurt, here,” he taps his temple. “And here,” over his heart.

Regulus has no idea what that means. He runs through every potion he can think of but he’s not sure he knows any that match that description. Not sure he can bring himself to ask Kreacher to go into detail.

“Then he—he took a necklace—“ Regulus sits up straighter. “And he be placing it in the bowl and the potion is being returning.”

A necklace.

A necklace in a cave hidden in a potion designed to torture the drinker.

There is no way that Voldemort would go to such great lengths unless—unless—

“—and when I be trying to drink, when I is being at the edge,” Kreacher continues on. “When I drank from the water—“

“Can you take me there?” Regulus cuts him off.

Kreacher blinks, startled. “No! Master Regulus no! You cannot be going there it is a terrible place! Terrible! Kreacher does not want to be bringing you there.”

“But could you?” he asks. “Could you Apparate us back there?”

Kreacher looks profoundly unhappy about this, but he can’t outright lie to Regulus so instead he reluctantly answers, “Yes, I is thinking so.”

Regulus nods, mind going a mile a minute. This is his chance. If he can destroy the Horcrux then James’s child might survive. Then he can prove to Sirius that he isn’t the person Sirius thinks he is. Then he can start over.

Maybe.

God, just maybe he can start over.

He wants to call Cerci but there’s no reason to put her in danger—a potion and a cave, Regulus can handle that on his own. And if they go now then he can be certain they won’t run into Voldemort. He won’t return tonight, not after he’s just been there.

This is his chance.

“Take me,” he says decisively, finally getting to his feet.

Kreacher's eyes go wide. "No—Master Regulus please—"

But he's doing this. This time. Just this one time. He's going to do it right. "Take me, that's an order," he holds his hand out to Kreacher who looks absolutely miserable.

"I is scared Master Regulus," he says in a small voice.

"It's okay," Regulus reassures him. He's scared too. Scared shitless. But he's trying. He's trying. "It'll be okay," his hand is still outstretched and after another few seconds Kreacher finally reaches out.

Crack.

The wind is the first thing Regulus feels, so strong and cold that it bowls him over, causing him to lose his balance in the rocky sand.

"I is sorry sir," Kreacher is at his side, helping him back to his feet. "I is meaning to Apparate inside the cave," he scrunches his nose. "I is not knowing why we ended up here."

"But this is it?" Regulus asks as he looks up at the dark rocks in front of them, jagged points forming a small opening, one you could almost miss. It doesn't help that the sun has practically set.

"Yes sir, this is it. But I do not think we should be going any further. You is seeing it, now we should leave."

"I have to get the necklace Kreacher," the sky is dark above them, clouds blocking out the waking stars. After a few moments Regulus looks down at the elf. "You can wait here if you want, I won't make you go in again."

Kreacher gives him a look like that's the most ridiculous thing he's ever heard. "Where Master Regulus goes Kreacher will go also."

Regulus smiles faintly. "We won't be long, I promise."

It's not until he starts walking that he realizes that in his haste he forgot to put on shoes. His socks quickly filling with sand. Regulus grimaces but doesn't stop. Knows if he turns around now—for shoes or anything else—he won't be able to summon the courage to come back.

The wind howls around them, waves crashing angrily into the shore, like they know he's not supposed to be there. The cave a secret no one was meant to find. But Regulus just ducks his head and pushes forward, the world going quiet the minute he steps between the stones.

He thought it was dark outside but his eyes still need to adjust to the dimmer light of the cave. He pulls out his wand.

"Lumos," he whispers, doing his best not to step on any of the sharper rocks. The passage is narrow, everything about the space pointed—the ground, the walls, the ceiling.

“Where exactly are we supposed to go?” he asks Kreacher, uneasy with how small the space is, already feeling trapped. His eyes are constantly sliding over his shoulder, ears peeled for the sound of footsteps. Of Apparation.

“There is a door,” Kreacher replies simply.

Regulus looks down at him and then at the dead end in front of them. He lifts his wand, wondering if he’s missing it in the shadows, but no matter how many times he runs over the rocks he can’t see a door.

“Are you sure?” Regulus asks finally.

“Yes, he is be cutting Kreacher here,” Kreacher presses his hand to the stone.

Regulus blinks. “He cut you?”

Kreacher nods, pulling his hand back from the wall and cradling it against his chest. Regulus steps closer to the rocks, slipping, as he does, on the wet ground. Biting down on his tongue to keep from cursing every time something sticks into his foot. When he’s close enough he reaches out, placing his palm flat against the wall.

It’s warm.

Everything else—the wind, the water, the ground beneath their feet—everything else is cold except for this. Regulus pulls back, eyeing it for another moment before drawing the point of his wand diagonally across his palm.

“No! Master Regulus!” Kreacher sounds genuinely irritated with him. “You should have let me sir!”

Regulus gives him a small smile. “I already made you bleed once today Kreacher,” he says, blood pooling in his palm before he presses it to the wall. It stings, Regulus gritting his teeth against the pain. The rocks beside him begin to shimmer and shake, and after a few seconds they dissolve into a door.

Regulus pulls his arm away from the wall, blood staining his wrist and sleeve, his pulse beating in the palm of his hand.

“Well,” he clears his throat, hoping that in the relative darkness Kreacher can’t see him shaking. “That wasn’t so bad.”

But Kreacher is not at all appeased. If anything he’s getting more nervous, eyes darting about nearly as much as Regulus’s—wringing out his hands and pulling at his ears.

“Please sir,” he whispers, and Regulus can see the little frozen cloud his breath makes as it’s caught in the light of his Lumos. “Let us turn back now.”

And oh how he wants to.

Every fibre of his being wants to turn around and go home.

And pretend not to know what he does.

“It’ll be okay,” he tells Kreacher—tries to make himself believe it too—as he walks through the door.

If Regulus had thought the front half of the cave was dark, it is nothing compared to this. On the other side of the wall the black becomes almost impenetrable, Regulus able to see nothing but the small radius cut out by his wand. Fear runs up his spine, tensing his muscles. He doesn’t know what Voldemort has hidden in this darkness but he knows it can’t be pleasant.

Regulus lifts a shaking hand in what he is pretty sure is the direction of the ceiling and speaks clearly: “Lumos Fons.” Light shoots from the end of his wand forming an orb in the space above them, brightening their surroundings. Regulus blinks, adjusting to it, ready for an attack. For something to jump out at him. But nothing does.

The ceiling here is higher, the cave much deeper than it was at the front. They appear to be standing on a shore of sorts, ink black water in front of them, and at the centre—

“Is that it?” Regulus asks, nodding towards the small island. “Is that where the necklace is?”

Kreacher doesn’t follow his gaze, eyes intent on the water, but he nods. “Yes sir. That’s where it is.”

Regulus looks around but he can’t see any pathways or bridges. “How’d you get there?” he asks finally.

“We is taking the boat sir.”

“The boat?” Regulus repeats, eyes running along the shore again, but the space is barren. Nothing but rock. “What boat?”

Kreacher grimaces, gesturing ahead, “He is calling it from the water. I is sorry, I do not know how.”

Every word they speak bounces off the walls around them. Repeated back. Like the cave is mocking them. Regulus closes his eyes for a minute. Trying to think of what he’d felt with his sliced palm pressed to the stone wall. The unnatural heat that had radiated off of it. He tries to focus on what that had tasted like. Smelt like. Dragged up inside him. The way he can feel James in the locket around his neck. Or Sirius, in the pictures stuck to his bedroom walls.

Magic leaves traces.

It takes a few seconds, to quiet his brain, his rapid pulse, but eventually he finds it.

Like metal at the back of his throat.

And he pulls.

The sound of something breaking the surface of the water has Regulus’s eyes snapping open just in time to see a glowing green chain shooting towards him. He’s barely able to keep it

from slamming into his skull, fumbling to catch it before eventually getting his grip. It leads right back into the black water.

“Fuck,” he hisses, heart jackhammering in his chest. The chain is cold—colder than ice, cold in a way that instantly spreads through his whole body. Shivering like mad, he gives it a pull, stepping back and watching as the nose of a small raft begins to peek above the water.

Kreacher grabs lower down on the chain and together they manage to drag the boat to the surface. It looks barely big enough for the pair of them.

“Clearly he’s not expecting many visitors,” Regulus mutters as he walks cautiously up to the small vessel, wand raised, ready just incase. But still, nothing happens. That almost increases his unease. Something isn’t right. This should be harder. But after a few more seconds of waiting Regulus reluctantly hauls himself into the boat, Kreacher crawling in after him, quivering like a leaf, eyes forever trained on the water.

As if it knows, the boat starts moving.

The stillness of the cave is the most unnerving part. The part that slips under Regulus’s skin and makes him twitch. Even with the light hanging above them the dark is barely penetrated, so much of the cave remaining unseen. So many dark corners for things to hide in. Regulus swallows with difficulty and tries to focus on what’s ahead.

When the boat runs aground it does so with a jolt, sending both Regulus and Kreacher spilling onto the floor, practically on top of one another.

“Kreacher?” Regulus asks softly, trying to avoid the echo. “You okay?”

When Kreacher speaks his voice is tight. “Yes, Master.”

Nodding, Regulus untangles himself from the elf, getting unsteadily to his feet and climbing onto the small island they’ve docked at. Now that they’re here, he can see the amalgamation of stones at its centre—they almost look like crystals—jutting up out of the ground, taller than everything around them. And at the top; a basin with a locket at the bottom.

“This is what he made you drink then?” Regulus asks, staring down at the clear liquid inside. He leans over, trying to smell it, to get a sense of what’s in it, but he doesn’t pick up anything noticeable.

“Yes sir, and I is—I is ready to drink it again on your command,” that takes Regulus aback, he turns to Kreacher who looks like’s he’s going to be sick. Pale faced and wide eyed, shaking again.

“Kreacher,” Regulus says softly, waiting for the elf’s eyes to meet his. “I’m not going to make you go through that again.”

He watches Kreacher’s forehead wrinkle in confusion. “But sir is be wanting the necklace, yes?”

Regulus swallows, chest tight. “Yeah. I’m going to drink it myself.”

“No! Sir no! Please, let Kreacher, let Kreacher! I will be doing it sir! I will, I will, I will!” Kreacher grabs hold of Regulus’s wrist in desperation, his voice so much louder in the empty space, the ghosts of his words still pleading for him as they bounce off the stones and disappear into the darkness.

It’s a tempting offer.

“No,” Regulus says after a brief pause, taking a deep breath.

He’s trying.

Trying.

Trying.

“It should be me.”

Kreacher lets out a pitiful noise and Regulus takes his hand and squeezes.

“It’s okay,” that’s turning into his new mantra, but he doesn’t have much else he can say. He lets go of Kreacher’s hand after a few seconds and re-positions himself in front of the basin, putting his wand away even though it causes a spike of fear to strike through his chest. He picks up the ladle.

“It’ll hurt?” he asks.

Kreacher looks thoroughly miserable. “Yes, yes but not—but here,” he taps over his heart again and Regulus nods as though he understands.

“You’ll make sure I finish it, yeah?” he says, wincing at the way his voice cracks, fear getting a little too close to the surface, making him feel light headed. “Promise you won’t let me stop.”

Kreacher makes another pained noise. “I is promising.”

Regulus exhales, staring down at the locket, feeling a bit like he might pass out. The terror is acid in his stomach, burning holes through his insides. But it doesn’t matter. Not this time. Not after everything. Not when maybe, maybe just this once he can have something beautiful. Regulus closes his eyes briefly and then forces his hand to move, to scoop up the liquid, to bring it to his mouth. He feels like he has to instruct his body on every step, like it’s suddenly forgotten how to work. Has to tell his lips to part and his throat to swallow.

It doesn’t take long.

Rarely does with a good potion.

The world around him rocks and Regulus grabs hold of the basin to steady himself as the cave blurs. There. Gone. There. Gone. Walls—familiar walls—sprout from the ground.

“I won’t do it!”

“I will not allow your selfishness to destroy centuries of hard work.”

“Hard work? Is that a joke? Since when does anyone in this bloody family work?”

“You will show your name the respect it deserves.”

“That’s exactly what I’m doing.”

“Let me have go Auntie, I’m sure I can teach him some manners.”

“Stay the fuck away from me Bella.”

“Oh look, the wittle baby has a wand. You think you can fight me cousin? Really? Go on, I dare you. Breaking you is going to be such a treat.”

The world rocks again and Regulus is back in the cave. The walls of Grimmauld crumbling into dust, his feet freezing as the cold stones burn through his socks. His whole body is trembling.

“Sir?” Kreacher asks tentatively. He’s looking up at Regulus with fear in his eyes and it takes a second before Regulus manages to answer.

“Fine,” he croaks. “I’m fine.”

He stares down at the potion, pulse quickening. He’s never encountered anything like this before. It’s like jumping into a Pensieve except—except the memory isn’t quite right. Distorted. Like a nightmare.

Hand trembling, he reaches in for more.

They’re in the library.

Regulus is hanging back by the door, holding the frame as he watches books and shelves be thrown about the room. Sirius and Bella going at one another. He wouldn’t call it a duel exactly. It’s too chaotic for that.

“Really Sirius? Are we playing hide and go seek?” He can’t see either of them, lost somewhere in the shelves. But his mother is standing not too far in front of him, frighteningly still, just watching.

“I thought you were a big strong Gryffindor,” Bella says in a baby voice, causing Rodolphus, currently leaning against the wall with his arms crossed over his chest, to laugh. “Why don’t you come out here and face me like the man you think you are, huh?”

Regulus doesn’t understand why Sirius is doing this. He’s outnumbered. He doesn’t stand a chance, he must know that? Know that they’ll only hurt him until they get their way? Why not cut out the middle part and just do what they want?

“Fine.”

He see Sirius then, stepping into the aisle between two bookshelves.

He sees Bellatrix too.

He doesn't know if she was throwing her voice, or using some sort of spell, but she isn't where he'd thought. Isn't where Sirius thought either, if the way he's facing is anything to go by.

"Well?" Sirius shouts, wand raised. He's scared, he does a good job of hiding it but Regulus can tell. Bellatrix is coming up behind him, a wicked smile on her face, and Regulus wants to warn him. Wants to cry out. But he doesn't. He never does.

"Walburga, don't you think this has gone far enough?" his father says quietly.

His mother only "sh's" him, doesn't even look back. But it's enough to catch Sirius's attention. His head whips towards them, just as Bellatrix's curse hits the middle of his back.

Sirius starts to scream.

This time, when Regulus finds himself in the cave again, he's on his hands and knees. The ladle fallen a few feet away. He heaves in air like a drowning man.

"Sir," Kreacher is at his side, sounding distressed. "Sir, is you okay?"

He can't quite find his voice, hanging his head and just trying to breathe, just trying not to vomit. It's a good long while before he's feeling strong enough to stand again, to pick up the ladle and go back to the basin.

"I'm okay," his voice crackles like firewood. "I'm okay."

He forces down another mouthful.

Regulus isn't sure how long the screaming goes on for. It feels like hours. Feels like days. He watches his brother contort, watches him flail and twist, limbs at impossible angles. The pain distorting his face into something barely recognizable.

Regulus's legs give way but before he hits the ground his father grabs his arm, keeping him up.

"Come on," Orion says quietly, eyes never leaving the scene unfolding in front of them. "None of that now."

Sirius is in a heap on the floor, breathing heavy. It takes a few seconds but eventually he rolls onto his side, pushing gingerly to his hands and knees. "Stupef—"

The spell doesn't even make it out of his mouth, Bellatrix cackling as Rodolphus sends Sirius slamming into the bookshelves behind him, leather bound manuscripts raining down. Sirius isn't able to stop the whimper of pain that leaves his mouth. He's only fifteen.

Walburga's steps are loud as she walks slowly down the aisle towards him, everyone else in the room freezing. Watching. Waiting. Sirius is sweating, hair plastered to his face, skin pale. Still, when their mother stops in front of him he glares. His hatred always stronger than his fear. Regulus doesn't understand it.

"Are you going to start cooperating?" her voice is empty, she could be discussing the weather.

Sirius bares his teeth. "Fuck you," he snaps, before spitting on the ground at her feet.

Walburga barely reacts, stare never wavering. And then, still without looking away: "Again."

"I said—"

But, of course, she isn't talking to Sirius.

A second later he's screaming.

Bellatrix takes the lead but every once and a while Rodolphus will throw in a hex, lazily, like he's bored. Passing the time. Sirius's voice becomes something raw. Something stripped and carved and broken apart. His face streaked with tears. Sobbing in the short moments he's allowed to catch his breath. It's shocking, makes everything around Regulus feel fuzzy.

Sirius never cries.

The sound—the sight—it does something terrible to Regulus's insides. Makes them twist into knots. Every part of him feel nauseas—his head, his chest, his stomach. He knows that if his father weren't forcefully holding him up he'd been on the floor, on his knees.

He stares at his mother's rigid back and silently begs her.

Make them stop.

Make them stop.

Make them stop.

Can't stand to watch anymore. Dropping his eyes determinedly to the floor. Wishing he could cover his ears. Wishing he could runaway.

"Regulus."

He flinches as his mother's voice cuts through the noise.

"Regulus, look up."

No.

No.

Please.

“Look. Up. Now.”

His father gives his arm a little squeeze that Regulus knows means he won't be getting any support from him. Taking in a shaking breath he lifts his head, meeting his mother's cool eyes.

“Watch.”

“Maman—“

She reaches out, grip on his chin unforgiving, nails digging into his flesh. “You will watch this, do you understand? And you will learn.” She jerks his head towards Sirius who is currently being sick, arms barely able to hold him up.

His mother lets go of him but Bellatrix has noticed the altercation, her clever eyes bouncing from Walburga to Regulus.

“Does little Reggie want to play?” she tilts her head to the side and Regulus feels as though the entire contents of his chest have just dropped into the pit of his stomach.

“Why don't you give it a try little boy,” she nods her head at Sirius, who's currently being pinned to the ground by Rodolphus's boot.

Regulus blinks, looking from his brother to his cousin and back again, trembling so violently he can barely see anything at all. “What?”

“Oh come on,” she grins. “Don't tell me you've never thought about it—all those times he's ignored you, made you feel inadequate? Now's your chance.”

She gestures to Sirius like she's a show girl, like he's her prize. “Go on Regulus, do it.”

They're all staring at him now, and Regulus keeps waiting for his mother to say something, to step in, to tell Bellatrix to stop playing around. But she doesn't. She just watches. And he knows. Knows exactly what will happen if he refuses.

Sirius turns to him then, their eyes meeting. He's never seen his brother look so small. So vulnerable. Sirius is mouthing something. Regulus can't quite make it out.

He thinks it's please.

Please Regulus.

Make them stop.

Regulus wants to look away, it hurts too much. But he doesn't. He wants to tell Bellatrix no. No. I won't. I can't. But he doesn't do that either.

This.

This is the moment.

He knows that now, years later.

It wasn't the Mark. He'd already given up by then.

This right here, when he stares into his brother's eyes—pleading and desperate and in so much need—and he does nothing.

Worse than that.

He lifts his wand.

This is the moment that Regulus Black makes his choice.

To be the kind of person who betrays the people he loves.

To be the kind of person who stands on the shore and watches you drown.

This is the moment he starts to rot on the inside.

Please Regulus.

Make them stop.

Please.

He wants to say he would do it differently now. But he still doesn't know.

Still isn't sure he could face the pain.

Please Regulus.

Make them stop.

Please.

The walls fall away.

Regulus's face pressing into cold stone.

Someone is crying.

It takes a long time before he realizes it's him.

It all goes a bit blurry after that. Regulus unable to tell one reality from the other. Kreacher must be keeping his promise because there's no way Regulus is still managing to drink the potion on his own.

Sirius screams.

“Does little Reggie want to play?”

Screams.

“Don’t tell me you’ve never thought about it.”

Screams.

“Go on Regulus, do it.”

This is a box he never lets himself open. One he closed before Sirius was even down the drive. He can’t hold these memories. Not without falling apart. He’d known, even at the time, that he’d made a mistake. He just hadn’t realized how irrevocable that mistake had been.

“Sir? Master? Sir? Sir!”

Cold hands take hold of his face and Regulus tries to focus, Sirius’s voice still ringing in his ears. He’s propped up against one of the larger rocks, his whole body aching. His head too. And his mouth. It’s like he’s been eating sand.

“Sir?”

Kreacher.

He takes a deep breath.

Kreacher in the cave.

He’s has to drink the potion.

Has to get the Horcrux.

For James.

For James.

For James.

And his baby. And god, maybe even for Lily Evans.

“I’m okay,” he barely sounds human. “I can take more.”

But Kreacher only shakes his head, eyes damp, hands still cradling Regulus’s face. “There’s no more sir, you did it, you drank it all.”

Regulus’s brain is a little fuzzy so it takes a moment for those words to sink in. “I did it?” he croaks.

Kreacher nods vigorously. “Yes sir, yes.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

Regulus leans back against the stone behind him, bringing his hands up to his face and exhaling. “I did it,” he repeats. “I did it.” He could cry. He chooses to laugh instead. Which, of course, turns into coughing. His throat is painfully scratchy. Every breath like dragging sandpaper up the back of it.

“I will be getting the locket sir and then we will be going,” Kreacher pulls away, scrambling up to the basin. “We will be getting you home.”

The coughing doesn’t subside and as Regulus is hacking up a lung his eyes go to the water’s edge. Not the most sanitary perhaps, but at this point, he really doesn’t give a fuck. He barely has to move—which is good, he isn’t feeling particularly stable—he just has to reach over, cupped palm dipping into the water.

“REGULUS!”

It’s the first time Kreacher has ever used his name like that. But he’s barely able to look at him, let alone say anything about it, before he feels something cold and slimy wrap around his wrist.

He’s expecting some kind of sea creature. A Grindylow maybe. What he isn’t expecting. Is a hand.

“Holy fuck,” he rips his wrist out of its grasp, nails scratching along his skin as he scrambles up the rocks towards Kreacher. “What the fuck!” Regulus pulls his wand out, blood dripping from the scratch marks on his arm.

“I is trying to tell you, I is trying to tell you!” Kreacher moans as Regulus stumbles clumsily to his feet, whirling around himself.

“Trying to tell me what?” he demands.

Out in the water, in the shadows of light cast by his Lumos, he can see vague shapes bubbling up to the surface. Heads, he realizes.

“That I went to drink the water,” Kreacher is rambling on. “And when I went to drink the water the bodies came.”

“Bodies?” Regulus repeats. In every direction he sees them, no patch of water clear. And then, at the base of the rock—fingers. Grasping at the stones, slowly inching towards them, grey skin slouching off of knuckles and wrists.

“Inferi,” Regulus says in horror, body going cold. “He put Inferi in the water.”

It’s the type of thing he’s read about but never considered, even for a second, that he would witness in real life. It’s horrific. Almost beyond comprehension, his brain fighting him, unwilling to accept what he can obviously see in front of him.

“You went to drink the water and the bodies came,” Regulus repeats slowly, trying to think of any spell that’ll save him from an army of the undead.

“Yes,” Kreacher says miserably, wringing his hands again.

“How did you escape?” his eyes go to the boat but, of course, there are bodies creeping up that as well. He doubts they’ll be able to push it off the rocks, let alone ride it to the other side of the water, without being capsized.

“You is telling me to come back.”

Regulus’s brow furrows as he tears his eyes away from the horrors in front of him. “What?”

“You is telling Kreacher that he must come back!” his voice is high and strained.

Regulus is so tired and so turned around by the potion that it takes him far too long to understand: “You Apparated? You can Apparate in here?”

Elves can Apparate places Wizards often can’t, but this—this seems like a grave oversight on Voldemort’s part.

“Yes, of course,” Kreacher says, sounding almost offended.

“Do you have the locket?” Regulus asks quickly.

“Yes, yes I is having it,” Kreacher holds up the small golden amulet by its chain.

Regulus nods, offering him his hand. “Then lets get the fuck out of here.”

Kreacher doesn’t need to be told twice, grabbing hold of Regulus without hesitation.

Crack.

Regulus feels a jolt, like slamming into a wall, and then he drops down onto his hands and knees. Still in the cave. Still on the rock. Still surrounded by dead bodies. The only difference, is that Kreacher is no longer beside him.

That isn’t right.

He’s only just managed to get back to his feet when Kreacher appears again. Looking panicked.

“I is so sorry sir, I is not knowing what is happening, I is Apparating just as always.”

Regulus waves his words away, “Never mind. Try again, yeah?”

Kreacher nods, this time taking hold of both of Regulus’s arms.

Crack.

Again Regulus slams into some invisible barrier, knocking him back onto the rock. “Fuck,” he shouts, gripping his wand and getting to his feet.

He tries Apparating himself—always tricky when you don’t know exactly where you are—but it doesn’t matter. The same thing happens.

Crack.

“Sir I is not knowing what is wrong!” Kreacher sounds close to tears.

Regulus’s eyes run the length of the cave, along the ceiling, the walls, the edges of the water. “He’ll have put some sort of charm in place. Clearly he forget to account for elves but me—me he thought of.”

He eyes the boat again, wondering if there isn’t some way to salvage it, overrun with bodies or not. He lifts his wand: “Stupefy,” he shouts. The spell finds its mark but the body is unaffected. Even if it had worked, what would he do? Stupefy every one of them? By the looks of it there are hundreds.

He closes his eyes, trying to think, trying to ignore the growing panic pulling at his seams, undoing him bit by bit. The cave here is fairly high, maybe—maybe he can fly out? Eyes opening he raises his wand again.

“Accio broom.”

That doesn’t work. He knows that immediately. Doesn’t feel the normal pull that he does when casting that spell. “Accio broom,” he tries again. And again he feels nothing. “Accio broom, Accio broom, Accio—Accio—fuck.”

Nothing moves. Nothing except the bodies in the water. Heads now popping up around their little island. Arms and shoulders pulling themselves to the surface.

Regulus can’t swim to safety. He can’t Apparate. He can’t bring anything to him. Before he can stop himself he folds over and grabs hold of his knees, laughing uncontrollably.

He’s stuck.

He’s stuck.

He’s fucking stuck.

“Sir?” Kreacher asks. “Sir I is not seeing what is funny.”

“Nothing,” Regulus chokes out, still laughing. “Nothing is funny, everything is so fucking—”

He’d done it.

Just for a moment he’d really thought—

“What are we going to be doing sir?”

Regulus tries to breathe, he feels out of control, his mind and body overloaded with thoughts and feelings, leaving behind a numb sort of buzzing. In his chest. In his ears. In the spot just behind his eyes.

He forces himself to straighten up. What are they going to do? It's a good question. An important one. What are they going to do? He exhales, struggling to think straight. To not scream or sob or collapse onto the ground.

"You're going to go," Regulus says eventually, pleasantly surprised by how even his voice sounds.

"I will be getting help?"

Regulus shakes his head, he's not getting anyone else involved in this mess. "No, you're going to go," he looks at Kreacher, then down at the locket in his hand. "And you're going to destroy that," he points to it. "Can you do that for me?"

Kreacher's bottom lip wobbles. "I is not leaving Master Regulus here alone."

"I won't be alone," he tries to smile, he's not sure what it looks like. It feels broken. "I won't be alone. But I need you to go, and I need you to destroy that, and I need you not to tell anybody, do you understand?" because if it gets back to Voldemort, if he finds out, then all of this will have been for nothing. Then he'll just make himself another Horcrux and none of it will have mattered.

"Master please I—"

"That's an order," Regulus says, hating how much he's used that phrase today. Kreacher has started to cry again. "You're going to go home, you're going to tell no one about this, and you're going to destroy that locket, okay?"

Kreacher sniffles, nodding his head. "I is not wanting to leave you," he says in a small voice.

Regulus feels his heart crack, and before he knows what he's doing he leans forward and presses a kiss to Kreacher's forehead. "Thank you," he says, struggling to control his voice, "for taking care of me. You were always so nice. I'm not sure I deserved it."

"Of course you is deserving!" Kreacher says, as indignantly as he can with tears and snot running down his face. "Master Regulus is being a good boy."

And Regulus doesn't have the heart to correct him.

Something splashes in the water behind them and Regulus winces. "Ok," he squeezes Kreacher's shoulder before stepping back. "Go now."

Kreacher looks as though he wants to say something else, but of course, he can't resist a direct order.

"Master—"

Crack.

And he's alone.

Regulus closes his eyes and tries to breathe, to block out the wet noises of skin slipping on stone. Tries to get a handle on himself. The numbness is good. The inability to fully accept the situation. Hopefully that lasts.

When he opens his eyes again the first thing he sees is the empty basin at the centre of the island. He walks up to it, noticing that the potion has not returned, running his fingers along the cold, slippery bottom. The empty space now feels so jarring, so obvious. He stares at it for a long time before his hand finally goes to the locket around his neck.

Spring.

Spring.

Spring.

A choked laugh leaves his mouth, Regulus cutting it off before it can turn into a sob. He'd been too rash to consider it before—the need for a decoy. How convenient that he's wearing one around his neck.

He slips it over his head, hands trembling as he opens it up, the night sky twinkling back at him.

Sirius.

Orion.

Regulus.

we're all there, together, holding up the night sky,

He'd said that. Back when he'd still seen Sirius almost every day. Still talked to his father. Back before he knew how much further apart they all could be.

It makes me think that maybe in a different time, a different world, there's an us that's still—there's a place that's not like this.

He looks at the stars now, fingers tracing over them.

“It got all messed up didn't it?” he whispers, words just for them. “I'm sorry about that. I know I let you both down. I know I didn't figure it out fast enough. But maybe...in another life...”

He watches them for a second longer before pulling out his wand. It breaks his heart to undo all of James's beautiful work. But in the end, it's rather simple, transfiguring one locket into another.

As he holds it above the basin he can't help but feel a little disappointed that he won't live to see the look on Voldemort's face, or his mother's, or Lucius's—when they realize that they lost him in the end. After all that work. The two Black heirs, both traitors. Who knew that all it would take to end a centuries long dynasty was a boy with ridiculous hair and glasses and a smile that could outshine the sun.

Suddenly it feels important.

Important that they know.

That somebody know; that after everything, Regulus Black finally made the right choice.

Before he can stop himself Regulus reaches for the Quill and parchment still stuffed in his back pocket. The letter to Cerci he never wrote. That he never will write. He tears off a piece, ink splotching the page as he starts scribbling.

To the Dark Lord,

I know I will be dead long before you read this but I want you to know that it was I who discovered your secret...

When he's done he folds it up into a tiny square and fits it inside the locket, placing it at the bottom of the basin. The potion returning a second later.

There are full bodies on the rocks now. Regulus does his best not to look at their faces—some more decomposed than others. He's on the highest point, but his free space is quickly dwindling. His hands shaking so badly that he's barely able to control his wand. It takes a few tries, but eventually he does manage the spell, Boo bounding into the cave.

Regulus lets out a relieved sigh at the sight of him, sinking to the ground, back pressed to the taller rocks. Boo runs laps around the island, the Inferi shrinking away from him, not very far mind you, but they've stopped their slow crawl forward. Now simply sitting in wait. Regulus hadn't known that would happen, though he supposes he isn't surprised. He'd just wanted to see Boo.

He told Kreacher he wouldn't be alone.

And he isn't.

Regulus tilts his back, looking up at the ceiling instead of what lies in front of him.

"You know," he says, swallowing with some difficulty. "I always thought I was Achilles in this story—the over controlling mother, the famed heritage, the great expectations," he smiles wryly. "But here I am James, wearing your armour, rushing off into battles I have no business fighting. Playing the hero, and failing, like the secondary character I am," he laughs. "But that's—" he has to clear his throat. "That's where the metaphor ends okay? Fuck fate, fuck

prophecies, let someone else handle it. Let someone else save the day. You just...go away somewhere okay? Go live your beautiful life. Fade into obscurity, leave the heroics to people who have less to offer the world. Don't go to Troy."

His hand reaches unconsciously for his neck but, of course, there's nothing there anymore, so instead he ends up scrubbing at his face. He feels so fucking tired.

"I would do it all again, you know. I would relive every miserable moment of my miserable life just for the chance to be yours," his voice shakes, and he thinks about fighting back the tears but in the end he doesn't bother. No one is here. No one can see him. He can cry now.

"You were...the best part for me. Of being here. Of...being. Just—the best part. I never knew what it meant to be happy before I met you. Never knew what it meant to be full. And I'm so sorry that I wasn't stronger. That I hurt you. That I—hurt," there's something freeing about not wiping the tears away. Not trying to hide them. "Thank you for loving me," a whisper. "I know that you probably shouldn't have, but I don't regret it. I can't regret it. So just—thank you. Thank you for all of it."

He sits up, finding Boo standing in front of him, looking right at him. And Regulus looks back. "This isn't me giving up," his words crack and Boo tilts his head, like he's concerned. "I really thought I was going to come back to you. I really tried. I hope—" his words break off into a sob, a stuttering, choked thing. The world around him suddenly becoming very blurry.

Still, he sees the glowing white blob Boo has become getting closer, feels the lovely tickling sensation of his presence as he sits next to him, right by his side. Flooding him with warmth. With love. With giggles and playful teasing and beautiful, gentle hands. Regulus closes his eyes, pathetic little noises still squeezing out of his lungs.

He breathes in deep.

Spring.

Spring.

Spring.

Somewhere out there James Potter is alive. And safe. And happy. Somewhere out there James Potter loves him. Loves him still. After it all.

Spring.

Spring.

Spring.

Regulus opens his eyes, finally wiping away the tears, Boo shifting to set his head in his lap. Regulus laughs wetly. "T-thanks," he manages, lightly passing his hand over Boo's head, more miming petting than actually doing it.

They stay like that for a long time. Until Regulus's breathing evens out, until his hands stop shaking. Boo settles him. Providing a comfort that Regulus has rarely felt. Like coming home.

Some of the Inferi have dragged themselves closer. Filling in the spots absent of Boo's light. He can't help but wonder who they used to be—if they have thoughts, if they can remember. If this is what will happen to him. It's work to stop his breathing from getting out of control again.

He knows he could stay like this, shielded by Boo, maybe not forever, but certainly for a long time. But he isn't sure it would be worth it. The last thing he wants is for Voldemort to find him here. For him to hand Regulus over to Bellatrix to play with before he kills him. To Lucius.

He looks down at Boo, the stag looking back. He really is such a beautiful creature. Regulus is disappointed he never got to see one in real life.

"Je t'aime, James," he says eventually, hand sliding down, holding the stag's face. "Je t'aime," he gives Boo a wet smile. "Since I was eleven."

Boo doesn't move. Waiting. Waiting to be told what to do. And Regulus thinks about sending him to James, he really does, but in the end he only lifts his wand; "Goodbye," he whispers, the stag disappearing into a puff of white mist.

It'll be easier, if James just thinks he's changed his mind.

If he doesn't know.

The truth would only make him do something stupid.

The bodies have started crawling towards him again, and because Regulus would really rather not see them he points at the orb floating above his head and whispers: "nox."

The darkness is good, though it does nothing about the sounds of flesh and bone dragging towards him. His breaths are getting shorter again, panicked, and he drops his head between his knees doing his best not to completely lose it.

He's holding on. To every second, every moment, greedy for every heartbeat.

Not yet,

he thinks.

not yet,

not yet,

I'm not ready to go yet.

Not until he feels the first curl of cold fingers around his ankles.

I've been here before, he thinks nonsensically, lifting the tip of his wand to his temple, struggling to hold it there. The hands are starting to pull him towards the water. I've dreamed of this.

“Avada-Kedavra.”

Somewhere, in the West Country of England, James Potter can't breathe.

Chapter 54

Chapter Summary

"My son, how long will you keep on thus grieving and making moan? You are gnawing at your own heart"

Chapter Notes

tw violence (via magic)
tw reference to sexual assault (very vague)
tw self harm

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

PART I TOM

Little boys never do know their limits. Always pushing. Running too far. Too close to the edge. Asking too much.

Mummy please.

Please.

Please.

And she gives in doesn't she? Makes him spoiled and weak until one day he calls and she doesn't answer.

Mummy please.

Please.

Please.

The beauty of having a mother who's dead, is you learn early on that no one is coming. Innocent or guilty. Fair or unfair. No one is ever coming.

So you better know how to swim.

Empty grey eyes stare up at him. Wide and unseeing. The body floating on top of the water, starting to bloat. Tom draws it to him with his wand, watches as it bobs against the island's edge. He crouches down, running his knuckle along the side of its face.

Regulus Black really is a handsome boy. Even half-rotted.

Clever too.

You never can trust the clever ones.

Or the pretty ones for that matter.

Tom knows that better than anyone.

Standing up he walks towards the basin at the centre of the rocks, reassuring himself, once again, that the locket is still where it should be. He lingers on it for a moment. The snake that's carved into the front distorted by the liquid on top of it, making it look as though it's squirming.

When he'd first learned of his connection to Salazar Slytherin as a boy he'd been rather delighted. Proud. But the more he learned of the Founder the more that feeling dulled. Salazar had no dreams of power. Merely defence. He wanted to build a wall around the magical world. But Tom, Tom wants to watch it grow.

Wizarding kind has become complacent. So many magical abilities remaining underdeveloped, so many possible avenues of study untouched—because they're seen as immoral. It's provincial and small minded thinking. Tom has no patience for it. Even at school he found the idea that some magic is "dark" tedious. That there was a "restricted" section of the library, laughable. These antiquated ideas have to be done away with. Especially if he is to achieve that which he wants above all else.

His eyes go back to the locket, thin fingers skimming the top of the potion before pulling away. He's here because Regulus Black has been missing for three days. And Tom doesn't need Lucius whispering in his ears to know that Regulus Black's loyalty is paper thin and that he's smart enough to do Tom's plans serious damage. Especially not after he found that book in Regulus's room. The one that had set Tom on this path in the first place.

So he decided it would be prudent to check on his locket. To make sure all was as it should be. And lo and behold...

He considers the dead boy, pressing the bottom of his boot into his cheek. He wonders if he even managed to get across the lake? Did he find the boat? Or did he try to swim? Tom supposes in the end it doesn't matter. The cave's defences worked.

He could bring the body back. He knows Walburga and Orion will want it. They're very touchy about these sorts of things—the old Wizarding families—with their crypts and

traditions. But after the stunt Dumbledore pulled with the bodies at the Ministry, Tom thinks he'd rather use Regulus to send a message.

You keep mine. I keep yours.

He'd suspected Dumbledore of having a spy for a while now, even though Pettigrew swore he didn't. He hadn't trusted Black, but he hadn't quite believed that he had the courage for this type of betrayal either.

You never can trust the clever ones.

Or the pretty ones.

No, he'll be leaving Regulus Black here. Unburied.

Many believe that to be killed by the Inferi is to become one, but that is not the case. You have to be enchanted. Tom cocks his head to the side before pushing the body away from the shore with his foot. An eternity as the undead is too good for Regulus Black.

He can rot.

On the rocks outside the cave Tom pauses, closing his eyes and letting the wind blow through him. Exhaling. He'll tell everyone that Regulus was a traitor. He'll make it known that he killed him and that there's no body left. That ought to scare anyone else thinking about doing the same. Maybe he'll throw in something about how loudly Black screamed.

Opening his eyes he looks out at the water stretching endlessly before him. It's all coming together, he's out maneuvering all of Dumbledore's roadblocks, and soon it'll be over. He just has to finish his acquisition of the Ministry. Just has to deal with the contents of the prophecy. Just has to push a little harder, inch himself over the finish line. And then he'll have it all.

Little boys never do know their limits.

PART II SIRIUS

His gloves are wet, his fingers starting to go numb as he packs the snow more tightly. All in all it's a rather impressive fort, if he does say so himself. He clearly has a future as an architect.

"Make sure the walls are solid okay?" he calls over his shoulder. "We don't want any holes."

He wishes he knew a drying spell. Also wishes he had a wand. Sometimes his father lets him cast things with *his* wand but he isn't allowed in the fort. No one is allowed in the fort except for Sirius and Reg. This is their home now. And they'll be safe here. Sirius'll make sure of it.

“Reg?” he calls out again. “Did you hear me?”

There’s another pause and then;

“So this is where you keep us, huh?”

Sirius whips around.

Regulus is sitting behind him, leaning against one of the fort walls, knees bent. He’s big. Hair longer than Sirius has ever seen it—their mother never lets it get past their ears—and he isn’t wearing any of his snow stuff. No jacket. No snow pants. No gloves.

“What’re you—“ his voice has dropped, and when Sirius looks down at himself he sees that he’s now in his pyjamas. Well, t-shirt and boxers, but he doesn’t feel the cold anymore. Doesn’t even feel the dampness of the snow.

“Not real then,” he murmurs, looking back up in time to catch the dry smirk in the corner of Regulus’s mouth.

“Not quite.”

“Dream?”

“Mmm,” Regulus hums noncommittally.

He squints at Regulus, inspecting him. He’s surprisingly detailed for a dream. He looks old. And Tired. And thin.

“Your hair is ridiculous,” Sirius says eventually.

“You’re one to talk.”

“Please, my hair is an institution.”

“Merlin, spare me.”

Sirius grins, sliding against the wall across from Regulus, their feet almost touching—it’s a snow fort after all, there isn’t much space.

“Well,” Sirius sighs, “this isn’t how this dream usually goes.”

Regulus quirks his brow. “You have this dream a lot?”

Sirius shrugs. “Used to have it loads. Less now though. More to think about I guess.”

Regulus is silent for a moment, the noise of the wind howling outside their fort filling the empty space between them. “Tell me how it usually goes?” he asks eventually.

“Surely you know. You’re there.”

There’s something a little sad in Regulus’s eyes. “Tell me anyway.”

Sirius exhales, blowing the hair off his face. “Well, we build this magnificent fort,” he gestures to the walls around them. “And I try to convince you that we should add a swimming pool—“

“To a snow fort?”

Sirius rolls his eyes. “Yes, that’s exactly what you say, every time. It’s really sad you know, your lack of imagination.”

“And my grasp on reality.”

“Yeah,” Sirius smirks. “That too.”

“What happens after I convince you that building a swimming pool in a snow fort would be a logistical nightmare?” he sounds eager, like he genuinely wants to know.

“Well, usually we play Exploding Snap, because, of course, being the genius I am, I had the foresight to bring a pack with me.”

“This dream sounds thrilling.”

“Oi!” Sirius kicks his foot. “I like it.”

There’s the glimmer of surprise in Regulus’s eyes before he quickly shuts it down. “Why would you like this?”

“Because snow forts are awesome.”

Regulus rolls his eyes. “Yeah but...why not dream about building one with Lupin or—“ his voice cuts out, James’s name sitting awkwardly between them. Sirius just stares at his brother for a minute.

“I never built a snow fort with them. Bloody shame actually, now that I think about it.”

“Really? That’s it? That’s the reason? Now who has no imagination?”

Sirius sighs, though he feels something uncomfortably like emotion growing in his belly. “After Exploding Snap,” he goes on instead of answering. “It starts to get dark, and we don’t have any lights out here, so I ask you if you want to go inside because I know how you feel about the dark,” Sirius has to clear his throat, has to look away from his brother’s face and stare at the blank wall across from him.

“And you say—you say you’re not afraid of anything when you’re with me.”

He lets that sentence drift for a minute, unanchored, just floating in the air. It’s a while before he feels confident enough to speak again. He’s surprised Regulus hasn’t said anything but when he turns to him he finds his brother’s eyes blown wide. Innocent and vulnerable. Regulus on full display—a rare sight.

“This is one of the last times I remember,” Sirius says finally, waving his hand vaguely around, “that you really felt like mine.”

Sirius can see Regulus swallow. “Yours,” his voice strained.

He shrugs. “I asked you to run away with me and you said yes. Just to the back garden mind you, but still, that felt far back then.”

Regulus is staring at him with an oddly vulnerable expression. He used to look like this a lot, when they were kids, his face wide open, his feelings spilling out. Sirius helped him fix that. It made him an easy target for people like Bellatrix and Lucius, who like to watch their victims squirm. Or their mother, who hates weakness. Still, Regulus has never been very good at doing things half-way. Once he shut himself up he never let himself out again.

Well. Except with James. Apparently.

“What is it?”

Sirius blinks, coming back to the present. Whatever had been on Regulus’s face is gone now. Molded into something more passive. Less revealing.

“What is what?” Sirius asks testily.

“You’re scowling.”

“Am not.”

“Are too.”

“Am not times a thousand.”

Regulus rolls his eyes. “You can’t even see your face.”

“I can feel my face.”

“What were you thinking about,” Regulus presses on, ignoring him. “That made you angry?”

Sirius glares at him, he doesn’t like being so easy to read. “None of your business.”

“Jesus Christ Sirius you’re such a child.”

“Am not.”

“Are too.”

“Am n—“

“We’re not doing this again.”

“Fine,” Sirius crosses his arms over his chest, leaning his head back against the snow wall behind him and closing his eyes. “We can just sit in silence until I wake up then.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

There’s some mumbled complaining that Sirius can’t quite make out but he pretends he doesn’t hear.

They do sit in silence, for an impressively long time all things considered. And by “things” Sirius means himself and his almost pathological hatred of sitting still. It’s honestly a relief when Regulus speaks even if he pretends to be annoyed.

“What were you thinking about Sirius?” he sounds tired—tired enough that Sirius opens his eyes, his brother’s grey meeting his. He really isn’t planning to say it, he doesn’t fancy sharing things with Regulus. It’s not a particularly smart move.

But.

Well.

It’s only a dream after all.

It’s not like it’s really him.

“James,” Sirius says finally.

Regulus looks confused. “You were thinking about James?”

“You and—” Sirius grimaces. “James.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah oh.”

Regulus looks down at his knees, fingers fidgeting with a piece of loose thread. It’s the first time Sirius notices that his brother isn’t wearing shoes—his socks wet.

“He wanted to tell you you know,” Regulus says finally.

Sirius blinks, tearing his eyes away from his brother’s feet. “What?”

“James,” he clarifies, “he wanted to tell you about us. I wouldn’t let him. In case you thought —“

“Thought what?” Sirius snaps. God he fucking hates talking about this. Thinking about this. “That he happily lied to me for a year? If James had wanted to tell me he bloody well should have.”

“I made him promise.”

“What, did he make you an unbreakable vow Regulus? Because otherwise that’s not good enough.”

“Same thing to him isn’t it?”

“Clearly not. Because he had no problem breaking the promises he fucking made to *me*!”

His hands have curled into fists, his voice overly loud in the small space. This is why he doesn’t talk about this. It picks at some sore part of him. Some unhealed wound. James knew, more than anyone, James knew what Regulus had done. He’d been there the night they broke Sirius down into little pieces, until he could barely remember how to talk. Until he could barely remember where he was or what was happening. James knew how much Regulus had let Sirius hurt. Had hurt him himself. So how could he. How could he—

“Sirius—“

“Go away!” he snaps, dropping his forehead onto his knees so he doesn’t have to look at Regulus anymore. “Get the fuck out of my head. I don’t want to talk about this.”

There’s a moment of silence before he hears Regulus sigh.

The next thing Sirius knows his alarm is going off.

He’s tired and grumpy when he drags himself to the Ministry. He’s wearing one of Remus’s jumpers which, yes, is pathetic, but he doubts anyone will notice. The sleeves are the biggest giveaway—too long, almost completely hiding his hands. He put it on by accident, stumbling around in the dark. And then he just...couldn’t quite bring himself to take it off.

Whatever. He’s pathetic. He doesn’t care. It’s not exactly new information.

He cuts across the Atrium without any real purpose. Laces slapping against the stone floor. The fountain has been decorated for Christmas—the statues dressed in Santa hats and elf ears. Hung up around the walls tinsel sparkles, fake snow falling from the ceiling and then disappearing the minute it hits the floor.

Leaning against the wall by the lifts he spots Dorcas. She’s also wearing an oversized jumper—though Sirius doubts it’s Marlene’s therefore making her less pathetic than him. She’s also holding a small paper cone in her hands.

“Are you eating chips?” he asks when he gets close enough.

“Yup,” she pops her ‘P’ before lathering an insane amount of ketchup on her next bite.

“It’s like eight in the morning.”

“Eight-twenty,” she looks up at him. “You’re late.”

Sirius rolls his eyes before reaching for a chip. Dorcas swiftly kicks him in the shins.

“Ow—fuck,” he hops around, grabbing at his leg and glaring.

“Get your own chips,” Dorcas says flatly, before turning towards the lift doors and pressing the down button.

“I didn’t have time,” Sirius mutters, reluctantly standing next to her, though not within kicking distance.

“You’re twenty minutes late and you didn’t have time?”

“Yes.”

“Interesting.”

The doors open and a small witch in magenta robes pushes passed them, followed by a very harried looking owl. They step into the lift after her, avoiding the bird droppings as they do, Dorcas pressing the button for the basement.

“You know what room we’re in today?” Sirius asks, staring longingly at her chips. Dorcas does not seem to notice. Or if she does, she doesn’t care.

“Love.”

Sirius pulls a face that makes her snort.

“Not a fan of love?”

He crosses his arms over his chest, chewing on the inside of his cheek. “It’s eight in the morning,” he mutters finally, staring down the lift doors like they’ve personally offended him. “I’m not a fan of anything.”

“Eight-twenty.”

Sirius shoots her a flat stare but Dorcas has gone back to picking at her chips, expression blank, though Sirius swears he can see the smirk in the corner of her eyes.

The Love room is kept under especially tight watch. Besides the regular security checks that they have to go through when they get down to the Department of Mysteries—making sure they aren’t Imperiused, aren’t taking Polyjuice, don’t have tracking spells placed on them or any recording devices—they also have the pleasure of having their minds probed by a skilled Unspeakable. A skilled Unspeakable using a charm to blur their face and disguise their voice, keeping their identity a complete mystery.

Not exactly confidence inspiring.

“Mister Black,” the Unspeakable’s patience is clearly being tested. “If you will not allow me to enter your mind we will have to consider you hostile and you will be asked to leave.”

Sirius grits his teeth. This was a fairly easy process for Dorcas, took barely two minutes. But Sirius...

“I am letting you enter,” and he is. Sort of. Well he’s trying to anyway. It’s not like he’s running away or punching the bloke. But he just...he’s had people in his mind before. It’s not a pleasant experience. Whenever his mum would do it Sirius would feel bruised for hours afterwards. The memories she had invaded sore, making him wince every time he thought of them. Like they didn’t belong to him anymore.

“Your Occlumency skills are truly inspiring. However, not useful in the current situation. Shall we try again?”

Sirius glares at the blurry face in front of him. “Yes.”

The Unspeakable doesn’t have to say the spell out loud, Walburga never did either. But Sirius feels it, feels it the minute he pours himself into his head, like poison in his ear. He winces.

Your defences Mr. Black.

The foreign voice echoes in his thoughts.

Lower them please.

He breathes out slowly, heart still catching, fear squirming in the pit of his stomach. But this isn’t his mother and he isn’t a child and goddamnit he just needs to get through this. Forcing himself to breathe, he lets a door appear in his mind.

That’s more like it.

The Unspeakable throws it open. Like it’s nothing. The sensation of having his thoughts revealed like nails scraping down Sirius’s spine.

Images start fluttering through his head, the Unspeakable flipping through his memories and thoughts like they’re the pages of a scrapbook. He’s meticulous. Professional. But every moment that passes makes Sirius’s stomach churn.

He sees Remus, asleep in their bed.

He sees James, smiling shyly as he tells them Lily is pregnant.

He sees Reg.

Reg in their snow fort.

Sees his socked feet.

Sirius gasps as his knees hit the hard stone floor. He's covered in sweat, shaking all over, eyes out of focus.

"Okay," he sees Dorcas's shoes as she steps forward. "That's it. We're done here."

"He kicked me out before I was able to finish my examination!"

"Did you find anything incriminating before that?"

There's an unhappy silence.

"That's not the point," the Unspeakable say finally, Sirius still trying to catch his breath on the floor.

"Actually, that's literally the whole point. He's clear. I'm clear. Now let us do our jobs."

Dorcas doesn't shout. Everything she says is very matter of fact. Delivered with calm confidence. It reminds Sirius of Remus.

"Very well," the Unspeakable mutters. "But I'll be writing about this to the Head Auror."

"Yeah, you do that."

A second later Dorcas is crouching down beside him, Sirius can't bring himself to look at her. Fucking embarrassing this is. Can't even get through a routine security check without having a mental bloody breakdown.

"You good?" she asks softly.

Sirius swallows. "Yeah."

"Good."

A second later she has her arm wrapped firmly around him, hauling him to his feet. His legs buckle for a moment but eventually he gets himself together, turning his head into his shoulder, breathing in the smell of Moony.

Pathetic.

Still. It works. Sort of. Settles the parts of his brain going haywire. Sparking and twitching and crossing.

Dorcas lets go of him but still eyes him with concern. "You're sure you're good?"

Sirius nods stiffly. "Let's just go, yeah?"

He starts walking, shoving his hands into the pockets of his jeans and trying to pretend like he doesn't want to go home. Crawl back into bed. And hide under the covers like a little kid.

After a few seconds of tense silence, their footsteps echoing around them, Dorcas clears her throat: "Want some of my chips?" she holds the nearly empty container into the space

between them. Sirius looks at them and then at her face.

“Are those pity chips?”

She shrugs. “Might be.”

He considers refusing them on principle, but then, that would contradict his other principle, which is to never turn down free food.

“Thanks,” he says eventually. The chips are cold at this point, and greasy, and covered in too much vinegar. But somehow, they still make him feel better.

He was six, he thinks, the first time his mother used Legilimency on him. They’d been playing a game—him and Reg—he can’t even remember what now, but something with a ball. In any case, Reg was only five, he threw it too hard and too far, cracked a window. An easy fix with a wand. But even at that age they’d known that wouldn’t matter to their mother.

So Sirius had lied. He told her he’d done it. To this day he doesn’t know why she didn’t believe him. It was just as probable as it being Reg—more really. But she had whipped out her wand and torn his mind apart. Found the memory. She’d found other things too. Thoughts. He was already hiding things back then. Things he knew would anger her.

He’s been told, many times, by many smart people, that Legilimency does not have to hurt. That it shouldn’t hurt. It isn’t that Sirius thinks they’re lying to him. It’s just that he’s never had someone invade his mind who wasn’t trying to take something from him.

When they get to the door of the Love room—an unassuming, boring, black door—Dorcas knocks. There are a few awkward seconds of just standing there, blurry faced Unspeakables rushing down the large dark corridor behind them, before the door is swung open by a man whose head barely reaches Sirius’s shoulders.

“Who in Bezoar’s name are you?” he has thinning hair, ginger, sticking out of his head in little tufts. And small, round, wire glasses resting on the tip of his nose that Sirius does not believe are helping him see anything. He doesn’t know why his face isn’t blurred—but then, he seems like the type of person who might forget about that kind of thing.

“Er—the Auror Department sent us sir,” Dorcas says. “We’re providing security for this room today?”

The man rolls his eyes. “Very well, come in, come in,” he turns away, letting go of the door and nearly slamming it in Dorcas’s face. Sirius stops it with his boot, the pair of them exchanging equally startled looks.

“Stay by the front, don’t come any further than the fountain, and don’t disturb me. Do you understand?” the Unspeakable says while walking away from them, hurried little steps slapping against the stone floor.

The ceiling of this room is significantly lower than the corridor, automatically making it feel more intimate. The walls covered in red velvet, not that you can see much of it what with the hundreds of paintings hung up around them. Some move. Others stand still. The lights are low, there’s a fireplace, and floating candles near the ceiling, making everything warm and soft. Somewhere, Sirius is almost certain a piano is being played. And there, in the centre of the room, is a giant fountain.

“What is this? Fucking Versailles?” he mutters as he turns around himself, trying to take it all in. The air here is thick—it smells like cinnamon, vanilla, chocolate—breathing feels decadent.

“Excuse me?”

Both Dorcas and Sirius turn towards the small wizard waiting impatiently in the archway behind the fountain.

“Did you hear anything I said?” he demands irritably.

“Er—yeah,” Sirius rubs at the back of his neck. “You want us stay here?”

“Sir,” Dorcas interrupts, causing the Unspeakable to let out an impatient sigh. “We’re supposed to do rounds of the whole area. It allows us to provide more thorough security.”

“Not here you’re not,” he says dismissively. “You’re lucky they’re even letting you in.”

Sirius struggles not to point out that this is, in fact, their jobs, and not something either of them is simply doing for fun. “Lucky” is not the word he would use.

“If you’re sure...”

“I’m sure. Any other questions?” neither Dorcas nor Sirius speak. “Excellent,” he turns around, practically sprinting from the room. “And don’t touch anything!” he shouts over his shoulder.

For a moment the pair of them just stand there, the noise of the running fountain and distant classical music filling the silence. Eventually Sirius can’t hold it in, he laughs, causing Dorcas to arch her brow.

“Oh come on, this place is fucking mental.”

Their shift is ten hours long. How the hell is Sirius going to survive ten hours in a room that looks like Valentines day just threw up all over it?

“It’s kinda cool,” Dorcas says mildly, looking around.

Sirius gives her an incredulous look. “Are you not hearing the bloody piano serenading us right now?” he gestures indignantly at the air.

Dorcas bites her lower lip, clearly trying to hold back a smile. “Bit much that, fair point.”

“This place is disgusting.”

Dorcas laughs. “Merlin, Sirius Black, I had no idea you were such a curmudgeon when it came to love.”

“I’m not a curmudgeon. I just have taste.”

Dorcas arches her brow, leaning back against the wall behind her. “Oh really? Do you? Because I distinctly remember you and James walking around for a week in third year wearing nothing but yellow robes with red polka dots.”

“Oh that. Well that was funny.”

“Mm, also there was that time you burnt part of your hair in potions class and instead of taking a hair growth potion you decided to cut it into a mullet.”

Sirius rolls his eyes. “These are isolated incidents, you’re being a little unfair here I—“

“Didn’t you show up to the Auror meeting a few weeks ago in leopard print trousers?”

“Oi! Those look good on me!”

Dorcas gives him a flat look that suggests she does not agree.

“Fine!” he throws his arms up in the air. “Maybe I have made some questionable style choices but this,” he gestures at the space around them. “This is another level of awful, you’ve gotta admit that?”

Dorcas shrugs, eyes trailing slowly around the crowded room before coming back to Sirius. “There’s a lot of stuff in here.”

Sirius looks at her suspiciously. “Yes. I’ve noticed.”

“None of it appeals to you? Not one thing?”

“This stuff is all bullshit!” he really means that, he realizes, suddenly growing much more sincere. “None of this is...love.”

He glares at a particularly gooey painting of two figures snogging. They’re dressed in medieval looking clothes—the girl in a blue dress, the man all dashing in his dumb giant hat and jacket, bending her over in the most aggressive display of PDA Sirius has ever seen.

“I mean, it’s part of it, don’t you think?” Dorcas asks, bringing Sirius’s attention back to her.

Something in him twinges, like stepping on a twisted ankle or pressing on a bruise. He runs a hand over his face and turns away, staring at the ridiculous fountain. “Fuck, I don’t know. Maybe. It’s not like I know shit about love.”

He starts pulling at his jumper—Remus’s jumper—which suddenly feels scratchy and heavy and all wrong. And he wants to take it off, but of course, he can’t just start stripping, and he’s already had his one allotted public meltdown for the day so he tries to get his fucking brain to shut up.

“Who’s the first person you remember loving?” Dorcas asks after what feels like years of silence.

“Regulus,” Sirius says without thinking. Because he doesn’t have to think. It’s an easy answer.

“Huh,” that noise makes him turn around, finding Dorcas with a contemplative expression on her face.

“Huh?” he asks.

But she only shrugs. “That was just a very honest answer.”

“We’re you expecting me to lie?” Sirius fidgets, suddenly worried he’s given too much away.

Dorcas takes her time answering, eventually doing so with a wry smile on her lips. “You don’t strike me as someone who’s quite that self-aware, that’s all.”

“Oh fuck off.”

Dorcas laughs and Sirius turns away again and starts pacing, unable to stay still. He trails his fingers along the paintings he passes, over the gilded frames, like they’re braille. Like seeing them isn’t enough. He needs to touch them to understand.

“How did you know?” Dorcas asks eventually.

Sirius doesn’t look back, still making his slow progression around the room. “How did I know, what?” He side-steps a Grecian looking statute of two figures wrapped around one another.

“That you loved your brother?”

Sirius rolls his eyes. “Now you’re just taking the piss.”

“I’m not, I genuinely want to know.”

Sirius comes to an abrupt stop. In front of him the floor has split open to allow for a tree—a whole fucking tree—to sprout from the ground. Admittedly it’s a bit stumpy, not much taller than Sirius, with thick branches making a V shape. The leaves are green and big and nestled in the centre of them are small, round, fruits. Plums maybe? He thinks as he reaches out. Or

“Figs,” he says as he gets one in his hand.

“Sirius!” Dorcas is on the other side of the fountain, not quite visible. “Tell me about Regulus!”

He rolls his eyes again, turning the fruit over in his hands. “He’s a prat. What else is there to know?”

He hears her snort and he thinks she’s going to let it drop but then; “How did you know you loved him? If he was the first person, how did you know?”

“He’s my brother.”

The fig rolls between Sirius’s palms, squat and purple. He’s not sure he’s ever seen a fresh one before. At his parents’ fancy dinner parties sometimes Kreacher would cook them. Candied and caramelized and baked. He can’t for the life of him figure out what they’re doing here?

“You’re not obligated to love your family,” Dorcas says eventually.

Sirius snorts. “Instinct though, isn’t it?” his nails puncture the skin of the fruit.

“Is it?” Sirius doesn’t answer that one. Doesn’t even try. “Besides, you didn’t say your family—didn’t say your mum or dad—you said Regulus.”

The juices from the fruit begin to snake down his wrist as his grip gets tighter. “Yeah,” he clears his throat. “Well...he was the only other human being in that house so.”

“And that’s why you loved him?”

Sirius sighs, dropping the mangled fruit from his hand and vanishing the mess. “I don’t know, I—“

There’s only a little more than a year separating Sirius and Regulus. So he can’t remember life without him. You’d think that would make them more like twins than big brother and little brother but it didn’t. The first memories Sirius has of Regulus he’s taking care of him. He was good at it, he thinks. He could always make Reg smile. Make him laugh. Scare his monsters away.

Sirius never much liked being himself, but he’d loved being Regulus’s big brother. At least for a little while. Before things got bad.

“He was kind of my whole world when we were little,” it’s easier with the room of stuff separating them. Easier when he can’t see Dorcas’s face. “I wanted to look after him, to keep him safe, to make him happy. He felt like...mine, you know? That house was so fucking miserable and cold and Reg...Merlin you should have seen him, when he was small, he just...he used to light up. He had these huge fucking eyes and just...he noticed everything. Wanted to know everything. Never stopped asking questions.”

Sirius lets out a heavy breath, hand running through his hair. “I felt like I had a purpose, being his brother, it gave me a reason to...be.” He could stop there probably, but instead he pushes forward, “My mum, she has this...talent,” he laughs humourlessly. “She’s real good at making you feel like you shouldn’t exist. Before Hogwarts. Before James. Regulus was the only thing that made me certain that I should.”

He regrets dropping the fruit now. He needs something to do with his hands. Something to distract him from that truth.

“He really broke your heart huh?” Dorcas asks softly, sounding close, and when Sirius looks up he realizes he’s done a whole lap. Found himself back where he started, Dorcas leaning against the wall a few feet away.

It’s a second before he can speak. “Yeah, ‘course he did.” Because Sirius had thought that was obvious. Had thought everyone knew that. Thought James knew.

After a moment she smiles. It’s kind. Maybe a little sad. “See? And you said you didn’t know anything about love.”

Something in him twists. A wave of nausea washing over him. “I’m worried I’m doing it again,” he says, jaw clenching tightly immediately after, embarrassed.

Dorcas’s eyes widen just a fraction. “Doing what?”

He shakes his head, boot scuffing against the ground. “Whatever I did to push Regulus away, to make him be...the way that he is. I’m worried I’m doing it to Remus. I’m worried he’s making a mistake and that it’s my fault. Because he’s a good person, better than me, and so if—if he’s doing something wrong—“ but he doesn’t even know what he’s trying to say, hands balling into fists. “I don’t think I’m very good for people.”

He can’t meet Dorcas’s eyes, doesn’t know why he’s telling her this. It must be the perfumed air and the thousands of painted eyes staring down at him. Oh and the fucking piano. He pulls at his jumper again. He needs it off. He needs out. He needs to fight. Or fuck. Or both. He just...needs.

“I don’t think that’s true,” Dorcas says finally, causing Sirius to laugh coldly.

“You don’t know—“ don’t know that I told Snape how to get past the tree. That I get mean when I’m angry. That I kissed Mary because I was lonely. “The first person I ever loved is a Death Eater,” he looks up at her and then away again. “That should tell you something.”

“Regulus’s choices aren’t your fault.”

“You don’t think?” he asks bitterly. “I raised him. I taught him how to shut his fucking emotions off. How to not think and feel. I taught him that he needed to be harder. And I wasn’t always nice about it either,” he shakes his head, nails biting so viciously into his palms that they’ve started to draw blood.

“I thought I was protecting him,” he goes on, because apparently he can’t stop himself today. “I thought I was keeping him safe but—but look who I fucking created? I raised him. Not my mum. Not my dad. I was with him every day until I was eleven years old. Telling him how to act and what to do. So whose fucking fault is it? Whose fucking fault?”

Silence.

The problem is, Sirius has been on his own too much. If Remus wasn’t gone this wouldn’t be happening—he wouldn’t be spilling over like this. Usually he goes to James and Lily’s for dinner when Remus isn’t home but recently James has been away on assignments and the silence of the flat is getting to him. Everything Alice told him sitting on his chest. Crushing his ribs. Making everything feel wrong, taste wrong. Nothing soothes him. Nothing is comfortable.

“And then,” he goes on, because it’s not as though he has any self-respect. “And then I left him.”

“Sirius,” Dorcas says kindly, ducking her head, trying to catch his eye. “I don’t even know you that well, and even I know that you couldn’t stay in that house.”

He tells himself the same thing—that he couldn’t have stayed. That it would have killed him. But it feels a little weaker every time.

“It was bearable when I had Regulus,” he says instead. “It was only once I was alone that—” he clears his throat. “It feels a bit like that. With Remus. Like he’s slowly drifting away. And one day I’m going to wake up and he’ll be standing right there but it won’t be him anymore. Won’t be someone I know.”

Finally, he forces himself to meet Dorcas’s eye. “It’s terrifying that. Looking at the person you love and not being able to recognize them.” Seeing Regulus at Hogwarts sometimes used to make Sirius’s skin crawl. Like looking at a corpse.

“Sirius,” she says calmly. “Remus isn’t Regulus.”

And he knows that of course.

He knows everything about them, everything about this, is different.

But for some reason it still feels so fucking similar.

“Okay,” he offers her a shaky smile. “Therapy session over, consider me officially emotionally tapped out.”

She offers him a smile back but he can see the hesitancy in her eyes. “Are you sure? Because I really don’t mind talking you know?”

“Thanks but—yeah I just—” there’s really no smooth way for him to exit this conversation. “I’m good.”

“Okay.”

“And um, if you wouldn’t mind,” he rubs awkwardly at the back of his neck, messing up his hair, “Maybe don’t tell Marlene about...this.”

“Of course.”

“Thanks,” there’s a beat of awkward silence that Sirius absolutely can’t allow at this moment so his mouth fills it with the first thing he can think of; “Speaking of Marlene, how’re, y’know, things with you two?”

Dorcas gives him a look like *“really?”* but Sirius doesn’t back down. More than happy to shift the focus of the conversation away from him. A first really. Usually he loves being the centre of attention.

“Well, I mean, we’re perfect, obviously.”

Sirius sticks up his middle finger and Dorcas laughs.

“Oh you know,” she waves her hand in the air. “It’s hard. She’s gone. I’m gone. Neither of us know where or for how long. We’re scared all the time. We snap at each other more than we probably should because of it. It’s hard.”

Sirius nods. “Yeah,” he wishes his chest would loosen up.

“But then, that’s probably a good thing you know?” she goes on, drawing Sirius’s questioning eyes back to her. “Means it matters. Means we have something to lose.”

Yeah, Sirius thinks before he can stop himself. That’s what I’m afraid of.

His gloves are wet, his fingers starting to go numb as he packs the snow more tightly. All in all it’s a rather impressive fort, if he does say so himself. He clearly has a future as an architect.

“Make sure it’s solid okay?” he calls over his shoulder. “We don’t want any holes.”

There’s no response.

“Reg?”

If he’s gone and wandered off again Sirius swears he’ll—

“You can probably stop that now.”

Sirius blinks. And just like the night before, his gloves disappear, replaced by the clothes he went to sleep in, his adult body now crouching in his childhood snow fort. And behind him, sitting against the wall, is Regulus. Older too. And in his socks again.

“Oh motherfucker,” Sirius collapses down across from him. “I just want to sleep, is that too much to ask?”

“Sorry.” Though he doesn’t sound remotely sorry, the little prick.

“What the hell is going on with me? Why the fuck am I dreaming about you?” Sirius pinches the bridge of his nose. No doubt his conversation with Dorcas didn’t help.

“Maybe you miss me,” Regulus says teasingly.

Sirius scoffs, dropping his hand. “I got over missing you a long time ago Reg.”

The younger boy flinches before he’s able to get himself under control. “Ah,” he clears his throat, “right.”

Sirius hates that he feels guilty. But he also hates that he said it. Which is always how it is with Regulus. No matter what Sirius does it always feels like the wrong thing.

“Sorry,” he says eventually, hating that word and the way it reminds him of being a scared little boy, standing in front of his mother. “I shouldn’t have said that.”

Regulus shrugs. “It’s fine,” and then, a bit stiffly; “not like I’m real right?”

Sirius watches him for a moment before slowly nodding his head. “Right.” He leans back against the snow behind him, looking up at the very questionably constructed ceiling that seven year old him was so proud of it.

“Is it true?” Regulus asks eventually.

“Is what true?”

“That you don’t miss me anymore?”

Yes, the spiteful part of Sirius’s brain wants to say.

The part that’s always a little too close to the surface when his brother’s around.

That wants to make Regulus hurt the way Sirius hurt.

“No,” is what eventually comes out of his mouth. The truth might not be that simple, but this is as close to it as he’s willing to get right now. He thinks he sees Regulus smile a little.

Sirius points a finger at him. “Don’t let it go to your head.”

“No,” Regulus says wryly. “Of course not.”

Sirius remembers building this fort. Remembers him and Regulus stomping through the snow all the way to the very back of the garden where they could barely be seen from the house. He’d really thought they were doing something. Proving something. He’d really thought he could build them a new home. A proper one. The type he read about in books.

“Do you remember the first time I tried to teach you how to fly?” Sirius asks suddenly, arms resting on his knees.

“Yeah, I fell off and you laughed.”

“Oh yeah,” Sirius grins. “To be fair, you were only three feet off the ground, and the squeal you made!”

“Oh don’t start with the squeal again.”

“Like a little pig.”

“Yes, you called me piglet for weeks.”

Sirius laughs. “One of my better nicknames. I don’t know why it didn’t stick.” He looks at Regulus then, tilting his head to the side. “You do kind of look like a pig.”

“Fuck off!” Regulus kicks him and Sirius kicks him back, still laughing.

“It’s your little nose,” he reaches over and flicks Regulus’s nose, causing Regulus to make an indignant squawking noise that does not help his case at all.

“You picked it up fast though,” Sirius goes on, Regulus still glaring at him. “Merlin, watching you fly…” he trails off.

Later on, when they were at Hogwarts, when things got bad between them, it would make Sirius jealous. The way Regulus handled himself in the air. The skill. The technique. But before then, when it was just the two of them at the country house in Scotland, he always felt so fucking proud.

“You should have been a bird,” Sirius finishes finally, snapping himself back to the present. “You were always happiest in the sky.”

Something aching passes over Regulus’s face. “I haven’t flown in years, you know?”

“What, no Death Eater Quidditch team?” it might have been funny, if it weren’t for the bitterness in his voice.

The words sit between them for a moment before Regulus eventually clears his throat.

“No,” he says finally. “No not quite.”

Sirius shakes his head, looking away. “I can’t just sit here and pretend that I don’t know what you are.”

“It isn’t who I am Sirius.”

“Still can’t take fucking responsibility can you Reg? Death Eater isn’t something you get to be part-time. You chose to get that Mark—“

“I didn’t choose anything!”

“Fine!” Sirius snaps back, eyes jumping to his little brother, meeting his defiant stare. “You accepted it then. Can we at least agree on that? You accepted this. You accepted what they wanted, what they were asking of you. Maybe you didn’t choose this life but you didn’t fight it.”

Regulus looks as though he’s grinding his teeth.

In real life, this would be the moment that one, or both of them, would draw their wands. Reg would say something awful and Sirius would say something equally awful back, and it would all fall apart. Nothing but curses and punches. He’s never sure if they actually mean it—any of what they do to one another. Because sometimes he thinks he really does. Sometimes he really thinks he could kill Regulus, given the chance. And other times he wishes he could go back in time. That he could stop himself from leaving that house without his little brother in his arms.

“Okay.”

Sirius blinks, not understanding. “Okay?” his brow knits together.

Regulus sighs, defeated, running a hand over his face, “You’re right. I accepted it. I didn’t fight it. I couldn’t see the point.”

That last sentence causes Sirius to pause, words tripping on his tongue. “Couldn’t?” he repeats. “As in past tense?” Regulus’s eyes widen a fraction at being called out but he doesn’t say anything. “Can you see the point now?”

Regulus swallows. “Yes,” his brother whispers, like it’s some big secret. “Yes I see the point. Sirius I—“

And his alarm goes off.

“You’re late again,” Dorcas is exactly where she was yesterday, leaning against the wall, white high-tops crossed at the ankles.

“And you’re eating chips again,” he reaches forward but she slaps his hand away.

“Get your own bloody breakfast Black, Jesus,” she presses the button for the lift, an army of paper planes zooming out when the doors open.

“You let me have some yesterday,” Sirius says petulantly as they step inside.

Dorcas rolls her eyes. “That’s cause you were looking all sad and pathetic.”

Sirius looks down at himself—jeans slightly too big for him, boots scuffed, same jumper as yesterday—he looks back at Dorcas. “I don’t know, I feel like I’m still pretty sad and pathetic.”

Dorcas’s eyes run him over, performing the same assessment. Eventually she sighs, reluctantly holding out her chips.

Sirius grins. “You’re a goddess you know that?”

“Uh-huh,” she snatches them back before he can get too many.

“Smo whamt room ware we win tmoday?” he asks, mouth full.

Dorcas is giving him an incredibly unimpressed look. “Death.”

Sirius’s eyes widen, before he swallows with great effort. “Well that’s...cheery.”

There’s no Legilimency today, thank Merlin, only the regular security checks. Apparently Death is not taken quite as seriously by the Ministry.

“Well, to be fair,” Dorcas says as they walk down the large black tiled corridor. The torches that light their way have blue flames in them. “Can you imagine if Voldemort was able to make us all fall in love with him?”

Sirius pulls a face. “That’s a disturbing image Meadows.”

“Exactly!” they round the next corner. “I’d rather be dead honestly.”

“Fair point.”

There’s no Unspeakable to greet them at this door. The room they walk into is completely empty. It’s round, with a domed ceiling and grey stone pillars holding up the edges. And in the centre, on a raised floor, is an archway.

When he listens, Sirius thinks he can hear voices.

“This is...”

“Depressing?” Dorcas offers, shoving her hands into the pockets of her checkered trousers and stepping forward, inspecting the arch.

“Pretty much yeah.” Sirius doesn’t move. Something in him itches at the sight of the archway, desperately pushing away. Trying to get out of his skin.

“Death is so freaking bleak in England,” Dorcas says suddenly, which is such an absurd statement that it startles a snort out of Sirius.

“Pretty sure death is bleak everywhere.”

But she shakes her head. “Nah, when my grandad died we partied for like a week.”

“Not a popular guy I take it?”

“My grandad?” she looks back at him. “He was amazing. Wouldn’t have been anything to celebrate if he hadn’t been,” and at the look of confusion on Sirius’s face she goes on; “I told you, this,” she gestures to the bare grey walls surrounding them, “is very English.”

“Where’d your grandfather die then?” he asks, leaning back against the pillar behind him.

“Trinidad.”

Sirius blinks.

“It’s an island in the—“

“I know where Trinidad is,” he cuts her off indignantly. I mean, okay, he doesn’t really. But he’s not about to admit to that is he? “What was he doing there?”

Dorcas gives him a bemused look, letting the pause stretch on like she’s expecting him to figure it out on his own. He does not.

“He lived there,” she says finally, the “duh” is heavily implied. “All my family—well, extended family anyway—live there.”

This is frankly shocking news to Sirius who already feels like Remus being from Wales is foreign and exotic. “I didn’t know you were from Trinidad?”

“I mean, technically I’m from Lincolnshire, but my parents are from Trinidad.”

“You’ve never mentioned that before.”

Dorcas shrugs. “You never asked.”

Which. Ouch. Okay. Not great.

“Sorry.”

She shrugs again. “It’s alright, you were busy with,” she waves her hand vaguely in his direction; “being Sirius Black.”

Sirius arches his brow. “Isn’t everyone busy being themselves?”

“I guess,” she wobbles her head from side to side. “It just always seems like more of a full time job for you.”

Sirius grimaces.

He's self involved, he knows that. Wrapped up in himself and his thoughts. He's so fucking loud, even to his own ears, it blocks the rest of the world out. He hates that about himself. It reminds him of his mother.

"Well, go on then. What's death like in other places?"

Dorcas raises her brow, like she doesn't believe he really wants to know, but Sirius doesn't take the question back.

"Well," she says eventually, sitting down on the sloped floor facing him. "For my grandad we did this thing, it's called Nine Nights, basically does what it says on the tin. For nine nights you have a sort of wake, where everyone shows up at the dead person's house and they bring food and alcohol and music."

"Sounds like a proper party."

"Yeah, I mean, that's the point. You're meant to celebrate. To remember how beautiful that person's life was, to recognize how many people they impacted, how their spirit lives on in them. It's about being together, you know? Helping each other, helping the spirit move on." She pauses for a moment, clearly thinking. "Here, there's so much emphasis put on what you've lost, but there, it's all about what you had. What you still have. It isn't...it isn't so—" she gestures at the gloomy, lonely room they're in.

Sirius feels something oddly achy in his chest, eyes drifting over to the archway as one of the voices gets particularly loud. Not enough that he can hear the words but...it makes the hair on the back of his neck stand on end.

"That sounds...nice," he says finally. Certainly nicer than anything happening in this room.

Dorcas nods, looking distant for a moment. Like she's lost in thought, the archway illuminating her from the back, making her hair look like a halo. "Lots of things are different over there," she says finally. "Sometimes I wonder if things here were different too maybe...y'know, all of this wouldn't be happening."

Sirius isn't quite following.

"Different how?"

"Well, the 'statute of secrecy' isn't taken very seriously on the islands so there's a lot more cross-over between Muggles and Wizards. It's like," she looks up, searching for the words. "It's like magic is just another culture in a place full of cultures, and they all kind of," she brings her hands together, interlocking her fingers, "mix."

"Huh," Sirius can't quite picture it, so much of his life has been defined by the hard line separating Muggle and Wizard. It's difficult for him to imagine a place where that line doesn't mean anything. Where it blurs and fades and is easily crossed.

"My parents have moved back there," Dorcas goes on, "they went when things got...intense here."

“Is it safer?” Sirius asks, having not considered how this war might be playing out in other countries.

Dorcas shrugs. “For now. If Voldemort is able to take over the Ministry I can’t imagine that will last. But I think they feel like—or at least my dad—that if they’re going to put their lives on the line fighting for freedom, it’s not going to be in Britain.”

Sirius’s face scrunches. “How come?”

“Well,” she goes on, with the air of someone explaining something obvious to a very small child. “Trinidad only just got independence from Britain. I think they’re a little bit keener to protect that than they are to protect the person who was trying to control them before Voldemort.”

Sirius blinks, feeling like he’s just been dropped on another planet. “I didn’t realize that was still...” he sort of waves indistinctly at the air, “a thing.”

“What? Colonialism?”

“Well,” now that’s she’s said it out loud it does sound a bit dumb. “Yeah. Seems very... Victorian.”

“Shockingly, it’s lingered.”

Silence falls over them, Sirius’s eyes trailing back to the archway, unable to ignore it, the ghostly white veil flowing between its pillars. It taps into some feral part of him, some animal instinct that says run, run, run. Honestly he doesn’t know how Dorcas can stand to sit so close to it. But then, clearly her relationship to death is different.

“I’m sorry,” he says finally, doing his best to swallow the wince that word always causes. His eyes go back to her’s in time to see her face scrunch in confusion.

“For what?”

And he doesn’t quite know how to explain. As with most of his apologies, there’s so much. “For not asking you more questions when we were in school.” He grimaces, because it sounds stupid, because it’s clunky, because there are so many other things he means, he just doesn’t quite know how to say them.

Dorcas considers him for a long moment, too long really, Sirius trying and failing not to fidget.

“Thank you,” she says eventually.

Sirius nods, wishing he could make himself a different person. A less selfish one. A less careless one. Wishing he could cut all of Walburga out.

His gloves are wet, his fingers starting to go numb as he packs the snow more tightly. All in all it's a rather impressive fort, if he does say so himself. He clearly has a future as an—

"Oh for fuck's sake," he looks behind himself and, of course, there's Regulus. Fully grown and sitting against the wall. Sirius sighs, dropping back into his spot across from him.

"This is becoming a habit," he mutters.

Regulus nods, not looking at him.

He watches his little brother for a moment, watches him struggling with whatever it is he clearly wants to say. Resists the urge to tuck him under his arm and tell him it'll be alright. It's not like it's true. It never was.

"I was scared," Regulus says finally. "I saw what they did to you, when you spoke up or acted out and it scared me."

Sirius is momentarily silenced by those words. It's a hell of a way to start a conversation. "See that's what I don't understand," he says eventually. "I was always the one who got the worst of it. Always the one she hated. Even before..." before he started trying to be, is what he means to say. There was a long time, as embarrassing as it is for him to admit, when Sirius wanted desperately for his mother to love him. A time when he was brutally denied that love over and over again.

"She always hated me most," he finishes finally.

"You were the heir. You mattered more."

"Yes," Sirius says bitterly. "And you were the perfect son. Always doing exactly as you were told. If anyone had a right to be scared of them it was me."

Regulus looks up finally. "I was the easier target."

"I protected you."

"Not in the end," Regulus says sharply. "Not once you had James."

Sirius feels his hackles raise. "Let's leave him out of this shall we?"

Regulus gives him a look that is somewhere between exasperated and sad. "He's a part of this Sirius. We have to—"

"So it's my fault then?" Sirius interrupts, because he doesn't want to talk about James. To think about James. Not here. Not with this.

Regulus looks startled. "What?"

"My fault for not being there, for having a life outside of that goddamn house, for leaving. My fault for not sacrificing myself for you even when you were barely speaking to me."

“No,” Regulus says sternly. “Stop it. You know that’s not what I’m saying.”

“I actually have no clue what you’re saying Regulus. You became their puppet—“

“I told you, I was scared.”

“The fuck do you think I was?” Sirius demands. “You think I was having fun? You think I didn’t feel like throwing up every time I saw her raise her wand? But I still stood in front of you. Still took the worst of it for you. So how can you sit there and blame it all on fear when you had me and I had no one.”

Regulus looks pained, hands rubbing over his face, through his hair, disheveling his usually meticulous curls.

“I’m not trying to make excuses,” he finally says, but Sirius is too riled up for this. Too tired of going in circles.

“Fuck making excuses, you want to blame me—“

“No!”

“Bullshit!” Sirius’s hands are shaking so he grips his knees. “You blame me for leaving—you’ve always blamed me and I’m sick of it. I’m so tired of being the bad guy in this story when I had to leave,” his voice cracks. “I had to leave.”

“I know,” Regulus says weakly. “I know.”

And Sirius isn’t sure when they both started sounding so wrecked, isn’t sure where the pressure behind his eyes came from or the trembling in his mouth.

“I had to leave,” he repeats, like he can’t stop himself. “Because you drew your wand.”

“I know,” Regulus is crying now. Sirius might be too.

“She asked you to hurt me and you drew your wand.”

“I know. I know. Sirius—Sirius I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

“You don’t get to blame me, not after that. It isn’t fair. It was never fair.”

Let me forgive myself. Let me let this go. I’m so tired of carrying this guilt around.

Regulus nods, sniffing and wiping at his face with the sleeve of his jumper. “It wasn’t your fault. You had to leave. I promise I know that. You had to leave. You had to leave me.”

Sirius feels something in him break, something profound, and he can’t look at Regulus anymore. Tilting his head back against the wall and shoving the heels of his hands into his eyes. The emotions tear through him like a landslide, leaving broken homes in their wake. He’s waited years to hear Regulus say that.

You had to leave.

He's waited fucking years.

You had to leave me.

It a long time before he's able to take a proper breath.

"I'm sorry Sirius, for so much, honestly," Regulus says eventually, voice rough. "But I need—I need you to understand, that you weren't always there. That you couldn't protect me from them."

Sirius's eyes find his brother's. It's another long moment before he's able to force himself to ask the question he never allowed himself to before. Never even allowed himself to think.

"What didn't I see?"

Several emotions flicker across Regulus's face—too quickly for Sirius to figure out what any of them are.

"It doesn't matter."

"Reg—"

"No, I can't, I can't," his eyes close and Regulus lets out a shaking breath. It's been years since he's seen Regulus show this much. Feel this much. "I just need you to know—to know that I had things to be afraid of that you couldn't protect me from."

Sirius winces, glad that Regulus can't see him. It isn't that he didn't know this, deep down, it's more that he didn't want to know it. Believing that he'd saved Regulus from the pain his mother inflicted on him, believing that by the time he left they loved Regulus too much to hurt him, let Sirius live with himself.

"Why won't you tell me Reg?" The truth is, he's not sure he wants to know. Not sure he could bear it. Not sure it wouldn't make him tear the world apart.

"Because," Regulus sighs, "because if I do it'll be all you see when you think of me. And I don't want that. I don't want this to become all that I am to you. I'd rather you hate me because of what I've done. Not because of what was done to me."

For a second all Sirius can do is stare at his younger brother. Because that really is so spectacularly fucked up. He feels like a bolder has replaced his stomach. Feels like the weight of all the unsaid things between them will crush him.

Eventually he swallows, reaching his foot out and nudging Regulus's. "Reg," he nudges him again. "Reg, look at me. Hey?" nudge, nudge.

Regulus seems to open and roll his eyes simultaneously.

Sirius takes a moment, gathering his thoughts. “I’m so...so fucking angry at you. For so many of the things you’ve done. The things you’re still doing. I’ve been angry for a long time. Sometimes it...it blocks out everything else. Everything we were before. I’m angry Reg,” he takes in a breath, “but I don’t hate you. I never have.”

He sees the surprise in Regulus’s eyes. His brother opens and closes his mouth like he can’t quite find the words. “Me either,” Regulus finally manages to croak. “I never hated you. Never.”

Regulus has told Sirius that before of course. Years ago, back in school, sitting in an empty classroom after downing a vial of Veritaserum. But it hadn’t felt real then. Potion or no potion. Maybe Sirius just hadn’t been ready to hear it. He doesn’t know why it’s realer now, even though it’s objectively anything but.

Only a dream.

This boy, this version of his brother, talking and feeling, a figment of his imagination.

“Thank you,” he says anyway, not even clear what he’s thanking him for.

Regulus nods, and then: “Sirius.”

“See, when you say my name like that I feel like I’m not going to like what comes after it.”

Regulus gives him an unimpressed look. “We have to talk about James.”

Sirius groans. “God, no, fuck, we don’t. We really don’t.”

“Why everything but this? All the other terrible shit between us but not James?”

Sirius bites the inside of his cheek and tries to refrain from lashing out the way he wants to. The way he wants to rip James’s name out of his brother’s mouth. He digs his fingers into the snow beneath him. Wishing this wasn’t a dream. Wishing he could feel the burn of the cold against his skin.

When Sirius continues to refuse to speak Regulus sighs. “You have to—he’s going to need you,” Regulus finally manages to get out, bringing Sirius’s gaze back to him. “He’s going to need you and I won’t be there so you have to get over this. You have to get over this so you can do what I—what I can’t.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

Regulus runs a frustrated hand through his hair. “It doesn’t matter, I just—I need you to forgive him for loving me too okay? I need to know that he’ll have someone.”

“He didn’t—” but Sirius cuts himself off. Old habits die hard. He’s so used to the pair of them trying to take jabs at one another, that he keeps forgetting that isn’t what they’re doing. That somehow they’ve formed some sort of truce. Only in his dreams.

“He did love me—does love me,” Regulus’s voice is fierce when he says it but Sirius can see the doubt in his grey eyes. At least until he closes them again, shaking his head. “Please,” he whispers. “Please don’t take that from me.”

But he’s mine, the childish part of Sirius wants to scream. I saw him first, I needed him most, why did it have to be him? Out of everyone. Why did you have to take him away? Because he had. For a year that lie had sat between James and Sirius, festering and growing and pushing them apart.

Eventually Sirius clears his throat. “Is your Patronus really a stag?”

Regulus actually laughs, eyes glassy when he opens them again. “Yeah, yeah he is.”

“He?” Sirius arches his brow.

“I call him Boo.”

“Wow, that’s...” Sirius rubs at the back of his neck, “surprisingly wholesome.”

Regulus snorts. “Yeah, well, I didn’t choose it.”

“But you kept it.”

Regulus lets out a breath, dropping his head back against the wall of the snow fort. “Yeah, I kept it.”

Sirius can hear the wind howling outside, can remember how it had felt as a kid, constantly listening for footsteps, for the sound of his mother’s voice. Or his father’s. Coming to take them away. Coming to lock them back in that house.

“For so long,” Sirius starts talking, not looking at Regulus. “I always knew where James was. At my side. Always at my side. And then one day I turned around and he wasn’t there and it felt like...” he forces the breath out through his teeth, body tensed. “The day you drew your wand on me, and the day James started lying to me, they feel the same. Maybe that sounds stupid but...I didn’t see either of them coming. I really fucking didn’t.”

He feels more than he sees Regulus roll his head towards him. But it’s another few seconds before he speaks. “I didn’t take him from you Sirius,” and when he scoffs Regulus presses on. “Not because I’m a nice person, not because I didn’t want to, but because I couldn’t. I don’t think anyone ever could,” Regulus laughs dryly. “I might have needed James, but I think the only person James has ever needed is you.”

Finally Sirius looks back at him, chest too tight—too tight to be healthy, to be normal, to let his heart beat in any regular way. And then, before he can stop himself, he says; “Why didn’t *you* need me?”

Regulus’s eyes go wide. “I—“ words stumbling, tripping on his tongue. “I did. Of course I did I—“ but he stops abruptly.

At first Sirius just thinks he's crying. Water suddenly spilling over the corners of his eyes. But almost immediately the streams become too thick and consistent to be tears—like rivers running down his face—like he's leaking.

“Regulus?” Sirius sits up, watching as his brother feels the water rushing over his cheeks, his drowning eyes returning to Sirius.

“Shit,” he sounds choked, and Sirius suddenly sees the small drips of water escaping from the corners of his mouth. “I thought we'd have more time.”

“Regulus what—“ but Regulus's eyes roll back into his head and his hands go to his throat. Sirius lunges forward, pulling Regulus into his lap as he—as he drowns in his arms.

“Reg? Reg? Hey? What's happening? What the fuck is happening?” he doesn't know what to do, doesn't know how to stop this, just keeps holding him, arms squeezing tight. “It's going to be okay,” Sirius says shakily, even though it's clearly a lie. “It's gonna be okay.”

So much water is pouring out of him that it's begun pooling around them.

“Regulus?” his brother shakes in his arms, horrible gurgling noises coming from his throat. “Regulus I lo—“

His alarm goes off.

When Sirius shows up at the Ministry Dorcas doesn't even make him work for it, just gives him one look and holds out her chips.

“We're in the Time Room today,” she says as they ride silently in the lift.

Sirius nods.

He feels simultaneously exhausted and buzzing with tension at the same time. A pit of anxiety weighing heavily in his stomach as his mind constantly replays his dream over and over again, no matter how many times he tries to get himself to focus on something else.

The look on Regulus's face.

The water.

The noises he made.

“Do you want to talk about?” Dorcas asks. The time room is the busiest one they've been in so far, with at least a dozen Unspeakables buzzing about doing god knows what.

Sirius gives her a weak smile. “I'm okay, thanks.”

Dorcas does not look remotely convinced but after a long pause, she nods. “I’m here if you need to.”

His smile is feeling more brittle by the second. “Thanks.”

When he gets home the flat is still empty, not that he thought it wouldn’t be but there’s always the chance...in any case, he tries to eat but can’t quite manage it. It’s like he has a hive of bees living inside his skin.

He wants to sleep but he tosses and turns for most of the night. Not managing to finally drift away until nearly morning.

He doesn’t have any dreams.

When he wakes up the buzzing under his skin is worse. He doesn’t have guard duty today so there’s no reason to get out of bed. Except that the silence. The stillness. It’s eating him alive.

He wanders around the flat, puts on a record, turns the volume all the way up, adds firewhisky to his coffee. But the foreboding feeling never leaves him. A cold hand on his shoulder. A sob caught in his throat.

Eventually he firecalls James.

“Hello you,” Lily says, hair spilling out of a messy bun on the top of her head, freckles on full display as her face pokes through the fireplace.

Sirius tries to put on an easy grin. “Hey gorgeous, how’re you?”

He must be doing a shit job at seeming okay because he can already see the flickers of concern in Lily’s expression, but then, she’s always been too smart by half.

“I’m alright, you know, getting by,” it’s the tone that really gives it away when she says; “What about you?”

He tries not to wince.

“Living the dream baby,” his voice is too tight, he knows it, sees all pretence drop from Lily’s face.

“Sirius—“

“Is—er—is your worse half there by any chance?” he cuts her off, not sure he can handle lying to her directly.

Lily grimaces. “Shit, no, sorry. Frank asked him to go into the Ministry and help teach some of the rookie Aurors how to handle their brooms.”

Sirius arches his brow. “Sounds kinky.”

Lily snorts. “I’m not sure Frank could even say the word kinky without blushing.”

“It’s always the quiet ones who are into the weirdest shit, I’m telling you.”

Lily wrinkles her nose. “Okay, enough, I don’t need to be picturing Frank in full body leather.”

“Ew! Lily! Stop giving me mental images!”

“You started it!”

“Well, you’re supposed to be the reasonable one not me,” Sirius fires back—rightly so he feels.

But Lily only rolls her eyes and sticks her tongue out at him. “Reasonable one my ass,” she mutters under her breath.

“Careful, the baby might hear you.”

That makes Lily laugh. “He’s heard worse than that in this house I promise you.”

“Speaking of—uh—how’s that going then,” he gestures vaguely towards her. “The whole, growing a person thing?”

She gives him an amused look. “Alright. I mean, early days still so he’s not really doing much but,” she looks down at what Sirius imagines is her belly. “I think we’re getting along okay,” there’s a softness in her eyes that Sirius doesn’t think he’s ever seen before, and he isn’t sure why it suddenly makes him feel so horribly lonely.

“Well,” he coughs. “I should—uh—I should go and...you know...but it was lovely to chat with you.”

When Lily looks up the concerned expression is back on her face. “Are you sure you don’t want to talk about something? I know I’m not James but...”

I feel trapped,

In my body.

In my mind.

I want to unzip my skin.

I want to live in something softer.

Kinder.

I want to pull the thoughts from my head like teeth.

He gives her a shaky smile. “Nah, it’s nothing. Don’t worry about it.”

“James will be back tonight, I’ll tell him to come round yeah?”

Sirius's chest feels tight. He wants to see James. Needs to see him really. But part of him also hates that, hates that everyone knows it.

"It's okay, I'm sure he'll be tired."

But Lily only scoffs. "Please. He misses you. Expect him around eight, yeah?"

Sirius doesn't know why that makes him feel so delicate. "Alright, thanks."

"Of course," she smiles. "Call anytime Sirius, okay?"

He nods, not quite trusting his voice as he pulls away, lets the fire flicker until there's nothing there but wood and ash. Sirius closes his eyes and tries to get a hold of himself. He flexes and curls his fingers, taking deep breaths.

"It was just a dream," he murmurs.

It doesn't help.

He takes about three showers but none of them make his skin feel like it fits right. Like it belongs to him when he brushes his fingers over it. He can't sit still long enough to do anything, bouncing from empty room to empty room. He stops putting coffee in his mug and starts just putting whisky.

That doesn't help either.

Eventually he ends up on the sofa, knee bouncing up and down, elbows resting on his thighs, staring into the fire. He needs to go somewhere. Needs to get out. He just doesn't know where. He stares so hard his eyes start to water and he has to look away. Focusing instead on a picture on the wall.

It's one of Alphard's, though at this point his uncle's stuff and his stuff has become so intermingled that he sometimes forgets it didn't all always belong to him. In the picture Alphard is smiling, close mouthed, a bit camera shy, as three young girls laugh and giggle and joke around him. Sirius has clearly never looked at it closely before because if he had he would have thrown it out. Too many enemies in that frame, too many memories.

His eyes snag on one face in particular.

It doesn't take long. For him to decide. It never does.

A second later he's off the sofa and out the door. Jacket and wand in hand.

He's never technically been here before, only seen the address on a few birthday cards. He takes one or two wrong turns but eventually he's landing his bike in an open field, a quaint little farm house a few yards away from him.

Most of the area is barren, what with it being winter, the sky above grey and dark even though it can't be later than three. Sirius silences the engine of his bike and climbs off, hand running over his hair, making sure it's all still secured in the small bun at the back of his head, eyeing the house in front of him. Now that he's here the nerves are starting to kick in.

"Well," he says, straightening his jacket, "here goes nothing."

Sirius takes no more than two steps forward before he runs into what feels like a brick wall. Or, well, a brick wall that's also running into him—throwing him backwards so that he slams into the ground a few feet behind his bike.

"Fuck," he wheezes, trying to get the air back in his lungs. He curls onto his side, coughing.

Wards.

He should have seen that coming.

Idiot.

"Really?"

His head pops up at the voice, dots appearing in front of his eyes—probably the result of slamming his head into the ground—he blinks them away, bringing into view a young woman holding the hand of a toddler with strikingly pink hair.

"You thought you were just gonna be able to walk right up to our front door did you?" the woman asks, amusement clear in her voice.

Sirius groans, pushing himself up to sitting and rubbing at his eyes. "Yeah, might not have thought that one through a hundred percent."

"You think?"

She walks towards him, her dark hair in loose waves down her back, eyes sharp.

"I was wondering if you'd come by," she says, letting go of the kid's hand—her kid, Sirius assumes, though her skin is darker than her mother's. Andromeda helps him to his feet.

"You were?" he asks. It seems a strange thing to say, considering he's never come by before.

She shrugs. "Just a hunch. Good to be around family in times like these and...well...we only have so much family we can be around."

Sirius assumes by "times like these" she means the war. Though he still feels a little wrong footed. Like he's walked into a scene without knowing his lines.

“Right,” he says finally. “Yeah.”

She gives him a long look. “It’s been a while, last time I saw you you were...”

“Fourteen,” Sirius answers. “Well, I think anyway.” His mother held a dinner a month or so before Andromeda left the family. Ran off with her Muggle boyfriend. Probably the only reason Sirius ever considered running himself. If it hadn’t been for Andromeda he wouldn’t have believed it was possible to get away from them.

The corner of her mouth twitches ever so slightly. “You’ve grown up.”

Have I? Sirius almost asks. Because most of the time he doesn’t feel much different than he did at fourteen. Or maybe he feels completely different but not in any helpful way. Not more mature. Not more knowledgeable. The opposite really.

“And you’ve grown a person,” he looks over at the kid and smiles. She crowds against her mother’s leg but smiles back nonetheless.

“Dora, say hi, this is your cousin Sirius,” she gives the kid a little nudge and Dora raises her hand.

“Hi,” she says, with that slight lisp children sometimes have.

Sirius beams back. “Hey, I like your hair.”

No sooner has he said that then the pink starts to drain away, replaced by dark brown—nearly black—tied in a bun at the back of her head.

“I wike your hair,” she says quietly.

For a second all Sirius can do is stare, but then he laughs. “You don’t say,” he looks up at Andromeda for clarification.

“I know, as if being a toddler wasn’t terror enough, this one’s gotta go and be a Metamorphmagus,” Andromeda looks down at her daughter fondly, mussing her hair. “Do you want to explain what a Metamorphmagus is to your cousin my darling?”

Dora gives her mother a big grin, showcasing her missing front tooth. “It mweans that—it mweans that I can do—um—funny things with mwy face!”

Sirius snorts, watching Andromeda frown slightly.

“Well,” the older woman says eventually. “Fair enough I suppose.” She turns back to Sirius, nodding over her shoulder. “Come on then, it’s freezing. Lets get inside.”

Sirius looks at the space in front of him warily and his cousin rolls her eyes. “Oh come on you big baby, they’ll let you in now.”

Sirius believes her. Mostly. But he still walks behind her with both of his hands held in front of him, bracing for impact.

Andromeda's house is sweet. That's the best way Sirius can think to describe it. A Tudor style cottage, with a dulled orange roof. There are rose bushes under the front windows that have clearly been magicked to bloom all year round, and thin green vines snaking up the walls.

"Just kick your boots off anywhere," she says when they get inside, Dora tearing off her jacket and running through the house. Andromeda rolls her eyes. "What have I said about leaving your things on the floor Dora!" she calls after her, shaking her head as she hangs up her coat on one of the available hooks near the door.

Sirius takes off his shoes but keeps his jacket on. It makes him feel...protected somehow.

"Tea? Coffee? Hot chocolate? Something stronger?" Andromeda asks as he follows her into the kitchen, her hair staticky from her winter clothes.

"Er—" the house is warm. A little cluttered. Discarded newspapers, and books, and toys spread about. There are dirty dishes in the sink, and a half-eaten piece of toast on the counter. The whole place somehow smells like lemon cake—Sirius thinks it must be a spell cause he can't see anything baking. It makes him smile though. Reminds him of the Potters'.

"Sirius?"

He blinks, finding Andromeda leaning back against the counter watching him. Then he sees her eyes do a quick circuit of the room.

"Oh yeah, sorry, place is a bit of a mess. I'd tell you it's not always like this but that would be a lie."

"No it's good, I like it. It's—" he falters, throat a little tight. "You did good Andy."

Her expression softens and he wonders if she's thinking about it too—the houses they grew up in. Everything in its place. Nothing meant to be touched. Not even the people.

"Thanks," she says eventually. "Now? Firewhisky? I feel like the occasion calls for it."

He scrunches his face. Occasion? Him showing up, is that what she means? He's about to ask when—

"Babe have you seen my turquoise shirt? I can't find it—" A tall, dark skinned man walks into the room. He's shirtless, which is a bit of a shock. Not that Sirius is complaining.

The man's eyes grow wide as they travel from Sirius to his wife. "Uh..."

"Well now I feel overdressed."

Andromeda rolls her eyes. "Ted, this is my cousin Sirius, Sirius, this is my husband Ted."

“Your cousin?” Ted repeats, not seeming at all reassured by that information. To be fair, knowing their family, Sirius wouldn’t be either.

He leans closer to Andromeda and fake-whispers: “I don’t think you’re helping.”

“Oh stop looking like that Ted, he’s harmless.”

“Oi!” Sirius says indignantly. “I can be plenty harmful I’ll have you know!”

Andromeda arches her brow. “Now who’s not helping?”

“I didn’t know you had harmless relatives,” Ted says, warily.

Andromeda makes a face that seems to say something along the lines of “*Yeah, fair enough.*”

“Sirius is a bit of an anomaly.”

“And also, I would like to once again point out, not harmless!”

“Aw,” Andromeda puckers her lower lip. “Of course you’re not sweetie.”

Sirius scowls, crossing his arms over his chest. “I’m starting to regret this visit.”

“Yeah, yeah, go sit down and I’ll pour you a drink. And Ted?”

Ted blinks, clearly still thrown by Sirius’s sudden presence in his kitchen. “Huh? Yeah?”

“Go put on a shirt.”

“What?” he looks down at his torso. “Oh shi—sorry. Totally wasn’t even—wow this is super embarrassing, I am—yup—okay, definitely going to do that now. Nice to—er—meet you.”

He nods at Sirius briefly before ducking out of the room.

Andromeda shakes her head, pulling a pair of glasses down from the cupboard. “He’s ridiculous.”

Sirius smiles. “I like him.”

He can see her fighting the urge to smile back. “Well I do too, obviously, but don’t go telling him that.”

“I think marrying him might have tipped him off.”

“Eh,” Andromeda pours their drinks, carrying them over to the table. “You’d be surprised, men are unimaginably dense. No offence.”

“None taken.”

They fall into silence, Sirius passing his glass back and forth between his palms, watching the condescension it leaves behind on the table.

“So,” Andromeda says finally. He can feel her eyes on him, without even looking up.

“So.”

“You’ve never visited before.”

Sirius grimaces down at the table. “I know, I’m sorry.”

“Hey, not a judgement, just an observation.”

Sirius doesn’t know exactly what to say, or how to explain what he’s doing here. Why he thought this would help. I mean, it is helping, he feels better not being alone in his flat. But he’s not sure he wants to explain that to Andromeda.

“Sirius,” she reaches out and gently taps the top of his hand, bringing Sirius’s eyes to her’s. She smiles, just out of the corner of her mouth. “I’m glad you came.”

It really is pathetic that that makes him feel choked up.

“I—“

“MummyMummyMummyMummy!”

Andromeda rolls her eyes. “Sorry, children have no sense of timing whatsoever.”

Sirius only smiles, privately disagreeing. He is more than happy to be spared the struggle of coming up with a reply.

Dora speeds into the room, hair still an exact replica of Sirius’s. Strands slipping from the bun and hanging around her face. She has, in her hands, a stuffed animal. It’s a scruffy thing, well loved, missing an ear.

“I wanted to show Sirius mwy wolf.”

“Ah,” Andromeda says knowingly, sitting back in her chair and taking a sip of her drink.

“Well then, by all means.”

Dora shoots Sirius a look and then shuffles forward. “This is Soup. He’s mwy wolf.”

Sirius arches his brow, shooting Andromeda a quick look. His cousin sighs. “It’s my fault, I called him “ton loup” and, well,” she gestures at the stuffed toy with her glass.

“Soup,” Sirius says, laughing a little as he looks back down at Dora. “Makes perfect sense.”

She grins, missing tooth and all. “I thought you’d like him, your hair is kinda similar.”

He hears Andromeda snort.

“I’m gonna take that as a compliment.” He kicks his cousin under the table.

“Do you wanna pwet him?”

“Hel—“

Andromeda coughs.

“—ck yeah I do!”

She offers up the little wolf and Sirius gives him a good scratch behind the ears. Trying not to think about his own wolf.

“There you are!”

Sirius looks up to see Ted in the doorway—fully clothed this time.

“Sorry,” he brushes his fingers over Andromeda’s shoulders before bending down to pick up a giggling Dora. “I was trying to keep this little gremlin out of your hair.” He tickles her belly and the giggling intensifies, Soup being whipped around in all directions.

When she settles Sirius sees that her appearance has changed again, hair now shorter and curlier, mimicking her father’s.

“He’s her favourite,” Andromeda says, leaning towards Sirius ever so slightly. “Doesn’t matter who else is in the room, she always chooses him.”

Dora and Ted are trading words back and forth, quick and quiet. Every few seconds Dora will let out a wave of childish snorts, Ted beaming at her, eyes crinkling at the corners.

“She has good taste,” Sirius says eventually, struggling against the uninvited jealousy in his chest. He used to feel like this a lot back in the early days, when he would visit James. But then, Effie and Monty adopted him so quickly that the jealousy never really had much to feed off of.

“That she does,” Andromeda says, staring fondly at her family.

“Alright bubba,” Ted settles Dora on his hip. “Time for your bath.”

Now, Sirius was under the impression that baths were something of a controversial subject when it came to children. Personally, he doesn’t remember them fondly. But Dora, Dora’s eyes light up.

“Bath time,” she says, in a little awed voice, as though she’s never heard anything so lovely.

Ted smiles. He has a nice smile, Sirius decides. It reaches all the way up to his eyes, big and vulnerable. He understands why Andy might be drawn to him. To a man who smiles with his heart instead of his teeth.

“Well,” he glances over his daughter’s head at the two of them sitting at the table. “I’ll leave you lot to it then.”

He gives Andromeda a look that Sirius interprets as *“do you need me to rescue you? Blink twice if the answer’s yes”* but Andy only smiles back, taking another sip of her drink.

“Have fun, do try not to flood the bathroom again.”

Ted rolls his eyes. “That was one time!”

“Bath time!” Dora interrupts, clearly having enough of this, Sirius doesn’t blame her. “Bath time! Bath time!”

“Yeah, yeah,” Ted kisses the side of her head, before turning to Sirius. “Sorry, when this one’s down for her nap, I might be able to come out and meet you properly.”

Sirius smiles back. “No worries, I expect bath time’s more fun than chatting with me anyway.”

“Bath time! Bath time! Bath time!” Dora agrees.

“Certainly is for one of us,” he offers Sirius another parting smile before hauling his chanting six year old back out of the room. Sirius watches them go, feeling the familiar itch in his chest.

“I know,” Andromeda says eventually, snapping him out of his thoughts, bringing his gaze back to her. She nods down the hall where her husband and daughter just disappeared. “Not fair is it?”

Sirius doesn’t know how to respond to that so instead he takes a sip of his drink. It’s good. Strong. Burns on the way down just like it should. After another few seconds of silence Andromeda sighs.

“So look, Narcissa wrote me about the funeral,” she runs a hand over her face. “I wasn’t going to go but,” she looks at him. “If you want to, I’ll go with you.”

Sirius blinks back at her.

“What?”

There’s a sickening moment of stillness in which he sees several emotions flicker across her face—confusion, realization, horror.

“Oh no, oh Sirius don’t do this—tell me you know? I thought—why else would you all the sudden show up here?”

And stupidly. Irrationally. He thinks it’s Remus. Which makes no sense, because why would Narcissa know about Remus’s death before him? And if anyone was going to be planning his funeral—but no, Sirius has to shut that thought down right there as an overwhelming wave a nausea washes over him.

“Who?” Sirius finally manages to ask.

The pity in her eyes. “Sirius—“

But he cuts her off. “Please Andy, tell me. I can handle it. Just tell me.”

She looks like she'd rather do just about anything else but instead she nods. "Yeah, okay, okay," exhaling. "Sirius I'm so sorry, I'm so fucking sorry. If I had known—" she shakes her head. "Never mind. It's Regulus. Regulus is dead."

For a moment Sirius's head goes silent.

But I just saw him.

I just saw him.

We were building a snow fort.

"No."

Andromeda reaches out, taking hold of Sirius's hand and squeezing it. "I know. I know."

"He—" the word chokes itself and Sirius closes his eyes, trying to stay in control. "How?" he finally manages to get out. The room suddenly lacking in oxygen.

"Voldemort caught him trying to runaway," a pause and then: "There's no body."

He lets out something strangled. A laugh and a sob all rolled into one. He makes the noise with his whole chest.

Fuck Reg.

There's no body.

Fuck.

Fuck.

Those big eyes.

Those socked feet.

"Sirius? Sirius are you okay?"

He hears Andromeda getting out of her seat, feels her sliding into the one next to him. Wrapping her arms around him. He isn't crying, that would be too simple. And nothing between him and Reg was ever that.

He squeezes his eyes more firmly shut as he lets her hold him.

"I thought we'd have more time."

Water pouring from his eyes. Pooling around Sirius's knees.

"I thought we'd have more time."

And Sirius doesn't know if it's him or Regulus speaking.

PART III JAMES

James Potter is a coward.

This truth is inescapable as he sits in his bedroom, head in his hands, knees bouncing up and down, trying once again to figure out what the fuck he's going to tell Lily.

He knows he's waited too long.

Regulus could have turned up by now. Could turn up any second. And that would be...that would be bad.

I mean, okay, it's all bad.

But that would be worse.

It isn't how he wants to...do this. Whatever the hell this is.

His nails dig into his scalp, pulling at his hair.

He's fucked up. He knows that. He does. He feels bad. Not...not maybe as bad as he should. Because he doesn't...regret it. Which is, admittedly, another layer of fucked. For the hundredth time he tries to pull his ribs apart, to poke and prod some answers out of his bitch of a heart. But he gets nowhere.

He loves Lily.

Loves their life and their home and the idea of starting a family with her.

But there hasn't been a day, since he was sixteen, that he hasn't felt the absence of Regulus like a hole in his chest. He hadn't realized how much until he was sat across from Walburga Black, listening to her tell him he'd lost. Tell him he'd been the reason she'd pushed Regulus to get the Mark when she had. So young. So fucking young. He hadn't quite been able to appreciate that at the time. What children they were.

I love you both so much,

he thinks for the thousandth time.

And I just...I just want that to be okay.

He grimaces.

I know it isn't. I know. But I just—I just want to be whole.

Please don't make me choose.

Please.

He groans, scrubbing at his face before he collapses back onto the bed.

He has to tell Lily. Tell her everything. All of it. He doesn't like keeping things from her, he knows she can tell he has been. Sees it in the looks she shoots him out of the corners of her eyes. This isn't fair. It isn't right. But every time he goes to open his mouth the words evaporate.

How is he meant to explain something he doesn't understand?

How is she ever going to believe him?

Forgive him?

"James?" Lily shouts up the stairs.

He's going to tell her. He is.

"Yeah?"

"Sirius is calling, says it's important."

Shit.

James looks over at the clock. It's nearly 8:30. He only meant to come up here and change and then he was going to head over to the flat. Lily said Sirius rung earlier, that he hadn't looked well. Remus has been gone again. James knows it's been hard on him.

Merlin he's such a shit friend.

"Tell him I'll be over in five, yeah?" he shouts back, getting off the bed and looking around for a clean shirt.

"He's not at home. He says it's important he—James it looks important."

Something in her tone makes his blood suddenly go cold. He drops the clothes in his hands and heads for the door, taking the stairs two at a time. Lily is waiting at the bottom, chewing on her lower lip.

"What is it? What did he say?" he asks as he heads towards the room he still thinks of as his father's study.

Lily shakes her head. "Nothing really. Just that he wasn't home. That he wanted to speak with you—just you," she pauses at the door, James's hand on the handle. He turns back to her.

"Just me?" he asks, confused. If it's serious, if it's an emergency, why wouldn't he want Lily there?

“Just go okay?” Lily looks scared but then, they’re all scared these days. “He needs you, whatever it is, I don’t like seeing him look so fucking sad. So go work some of your James Potter magic and fix him,” she gives James a small smile and he can’t help leaning forward and kissing the top of her head.

“I love you,” he says automatically, feeling a spike of guilt cut through his stomach so sharply he nearly doubles over.

“I love you too.”

He’s going to tell her. He is.

He closes the door behind him, walking towards Sirius’s face in the fire. He looks distant. And...something else James can’t put his finger on.

“Hey,” he says softly, kneeling in front of him. “What’s up? What’s wrong?”

“James.”

The broken way he says his name makes James want to jump through the fire.

“Where are you?” he asks, “I’ll come get you.”

A shaky smile flickers across Sirius’s face. “Are you going to rescue me James?”

“Don’t ask stupid questions. Just tell me where you are. Tell me who I have to fucking murder.” Tell me who put that bruised look in your eyes. Promise it wasn’t me.

“I’m okay,” Sirius says eventually, and apparently seeing the look of absolutely disbelief on James’s face he goes on: “I mean I’m safe. I’m at Andy’s.”

James blinks, momentarily taken off guard. “Andy’s? As in your cousin Andy?”

“That’s the one.”

“What are you doing there?”

Sirius looks like the question makes him tired. “I just needed to...not be in an empty flat. And you were busy so—“

“Listen, I’ll come over okay? I’ll come over now—“

“James,” Sirius stops him.

Something is wrong.

It isn’t just Remus being gone.

Something is wrong with Sirius and it’s starting to make James panic.

“I think I’m going to stay here, for the night anyway,” Sirius goes on.

James shakes his head, not understanding. “Sirius, tell me what’s happening? Because I’m so fucking lost.”

Sirius shifts, sitting with his knees bent, hands clasped in front him. “I thought—I wanted you to hear this from me,” he looks up and then away, and James swears he’s going to lose it if Sirius doesn’t start explaining himself because he can’t take the anxiety. The building pressure in his chest.

It’s Remus,

the horrible voice in his head says.

Something’s happened to Remus.

Though James doubts Sirius would be this calm if that were the case.

Sirius sighs, scrubbing at his face. “Regulus is dead.”

James just looks at him. “What?”

“I guess he got cold feet, he was trying to get out, Voldemort caught him.”

No.

No.

No.

“What?”

“There’s no body,” Sirius is just rambling on, barely listening to James, barely looking at him, like he can’t wait to have this all out of him. To stop tasting it in his mouth. “But they’re having a funeral anyway, something small, in a few days. Me and Andy talked about it but I don’t think we’re going to go. We’re not technically invited and it would probably just end in a fucking duel anyway.”

James’s whole body has gone cold, a faint sort of buzzing in his ears. “He—“

But that’s as far as he gets. Nothing else comes out.

He can’t think. He can’t think. Because every time he tries—

“James? Are you—are you okay?”

Nothing is making sense.

“I—“

He promised.

This time he promised.

So many years, and so many fights, and finally he was going to leave.

“I just can’t quite—” nothing is coming out of his mouth. Nothing is coming into his head. Stuck between shock and the desire not to make this worse for Sirius. Sirius who looks so small right now. James has always done his best to protect him. It’s second nature. Even if what he’s protecting him from is himself.

“No, I can’t really either,” Sirius lets out a heavy breath. “I mean, fuck him, fuck him for all of it, but I never thought this was as far as we would get you know? I thought there was going to be more than this, I thought eventually he would fucking...try to fix this.”

James squeezes his eyes shut. It feels as though his body is getting smaller and smaller, caving in on itself.

“He did try to fix it,” James croaks. “Like you said, he was trying to get out, that’s what—“

“Yeah but who knows where he was going or why he was leaving. Him being too chicken shit to do whatever they were asking him to isn’t the same as him realizing he was wrong.”

James wants to tell him—needs to—but he can’t fucking breathe.

And suddenly he’s back in the Astronomy Tower.

And Regulus Black has just kissed him for the first time.

He should have seen it coming. He didn’t. But he should have.

He’s so warm.

His mouth.

His hands.

For a boy who walks around like he’s made of stone Regulus touches like the sun.

“James?”

It’s okay. This is okay. This can be okay.

It’s just a kiss.

Except it isn’t.

It’s Sirius’s brother.

It’s Regulus Black.

It’s a boy.

Breathe.

In and out.

In and out.

A boy who touches like the sun.

“James!”

His eyes fly open, and they’re wet but he isn’t crying, though he’s almost certain that any second he’s going to be sick. He’s going to scream. He’s going to start digging into his chest. To get it out. Get it out. The ache. The pain. Get it out. Get it out.

“Sorry,” he croaks. “Sorry it’s been a long day and I can’t really—this is doing my head in.”

Sirius gives him a concerned look. “I know, I—“ There’s a voice in the background, Sirius’s head turning for a second. “Yeah,” he says over his shoulder. “Thanks.” He looks apologetic when he returns. “Sorry, that was Andy, she’s just letting me know there’s food.”

James nods, hoping it doesn’t look as shaky as it feels. “You should go.”

He doesn’t want to break down in front of Sirius. It doesn’t seem fair. It isn’t what he does. He’s the strong one. He’s the one that Sirius is supposed to be able to count on in moments like this. To lean on. He doesn’t want him here while he crumbles into dust.

“I don’t have to—”

James swallows. “It’s helping, being with them?”

He sees the surprise on Sirius’s face and then the slight pinkening—embarrassment. He’s always embarrassed every time he admits to wanting a family. Like it’s some dirty secret.

“Yeah,” he says finally, voice a little rough. “Yeah, it’s helping.”

James nods. “Then you should go.”

Sirius hesitates for a moment before finally conceding. “Okay, yeah I’ll—yeah. Take care of yourself okay? We’ll talk later.”

“Yeah, you too.”

The minute he’s alone James collapses forward onto his hands and knees. Gasping for air. Dry heaving. He ought to find a bin, something to be sick into, but he isn’t sure he can move.

I just want to hold him.

It’s a stupid thing to think. But his brain won’t let it go.

I just want to feel him. The warmth of his skin, the weight of him, the pressure of his head on my chest. Knowing he’s safe because I have him. I have him and I’m not going to let anyone hurt him. Not anymore. Not again.

I just want to hold him.

But he can't.

Because Regulus is dead.

Regulus is dead.

Regulus is dead.

There isn't even a body.

James screams. He screams hoping it'll tear him apart. Hoping it will drown out every thought in his head. Every feeling in his chest. He screams and he screams and it isn't enough. It isn't fucking enough.

You're going to be insufferable aren't you?

Yes. God yes.

These screams have claws, dragging pieces of James with them on their way out. Good. Get it out. Get it out. Get the pain out. It's driving him mad. He can't take this. It's driving him all the way out of his head.

You're gorgeous, you know that?

You're drunk.

Yeah, but it'd still be true if I was sober.

He needs a knife. Needs something sharp.

I'm glad you came.

Go to sleep James.

He's started scratching at his skin, vicious red lines left behind. Get it out. Get it out. He's panicking. He knows it. But people were not built to lose this much. His body can't hold it.

Not everyone can be a hero.

There aren't any heroes, remember? You said that. No heroes, no villains, just people.

It's harder to believe that standing next to you.

I don't know who or what made you give up on yourself Regulus, but I need you to stop.

James—

You are worth saving.

“James? James!”

Lily is on the floor in front of him, she’s blurry, but definitely there, pale faced and shocked as she grabs hold of his wrists, stopping him from tearing himself apart. He’s crying now, voice gone, unable to make sense of his own thoughts.

“What happened?” she lets go of his wrists, hands coming up to his face, thumbs desperately trying to wipe away his tears.

He is overflowing. Spilling out of himself. Staining the carpet. For generations people will find pieces of him between the floorboards.

“James please,” Lily says softly, hands steady, as they hold him. “Tell me what’s happened?”

He tries to blink through the tears, tries to find her, to use her as an anchor. But nothing feels solid enough to hold onto.

“He’s dead,” the words come out as a whine. “Oh fuck, oh fuck, he’s dead.”

He would give anything to be unconscious right now.

“Who’s dead? James, who’s dead?”

His breaths are choked and stuttered, getting caught in his chest. He finds her green eyes through it all—strong, like the rest of her. He tries to inhale, it’s hard, hard when he feels like he’s made of fault lines. Of earth quakes.

“Regulus,” he whispers, certain Lily’s hands are the only things keeping him together.

“Regulus is dead.”

He wants to start screaming again.

“Oh.”

He can’t make sense of her expression, can barely see it, but for some reason, now that he’s started he can’t stop. “He—he was,” James closes his eyes. “We were together.”

There’s a moment of stillness.

“Yes,” Lily says finally. “I know.”

James’s eyes fly open. “What?”

Lily smiles sadly. “Sixth year, someone important to you was missing, you gave me the little Quaffle—beautiful magic that was, really, the charm work—but in the centre, your initials were tangled around one another: J R. A few days later Regulus was back in school.”

He shakes his head. “But you never said?”

“I figured it was none of my business,” she shrugs. “If you’d wanted to tell me you would have. It—it doesn’t matter to me James, surely you know that?”

James Potter is a coward.

The worst kind of coward.

James Potter is also full of cracks.

“I saw him,” he chokes.

Lily’s brow furrows. “What?”

“I saw him.”

She still looks confused. She won’t in a second. “You saw him when? Where?”

“A few weeks ago. Grimmauld Place.”

Her eyes shift, gaze growing just a tad bit colder, hands falling away. “You went to his house?”

“Yes.”

They stare at one another, James shaking, trying his best not to look away. It’s the least he can do. Her eyes run him up and down. Clever. Always able to read him. He sees the moment she understands. Really understands.

“You went to his house,” she repeats, a new edge in her voice.

“I’m sorry,” James blurts out. He means it and he doesn’t. Because he wouldn’t take it back. But he wishes he hadn’t done it. And he doesn’t know how to make sense of those two feelings.

Lily has gone almost frighteningly still, her face blank.

“I’m sorry,” and he is. Sorry to both of them. “I’m sorry.”

“Okay,” Lily says finally, her voice careful. Her voice on a tight leash. Like she’s afraid if she gives it too much length it’ll get away from her.

James’s surprise must show on his face because she keeps going; “I don’t mean okay, as in “it’s okay” I mean okay as in...” she takes a deep breath, frustration and anger and something else all building up around her. “As in, we’ll talk about this when you’re not in the middle of having a fucking break down. Okay?”

“Okay,” the word trembles. “Okay. I’m sorry. I love y—“

She holds up her hand, cutting him off. “Yeah, I’m going to need you to not say that to me right now.”

Which hurts, but it's not even close to all the other hurt so he barely feels it. Nodding his head because he doesn't trust himself to speak. He collapses back against his father's desk and pulls his legs in, burying his face in his knees.

He doesn't know what else to do.

Doesn't know what else to do but sit here and bear it.

He hears shuffling distantly. He assumes it's Lily getting up. Walking away. He certainly doesn't blame her. Except that a second later he feels the weight of a warm body at his side, and then, with a sigh, an arm wrapping around his shoulders and pulling him into her.

"I'm sorry."

"Shh," she quiets him. "Later." She tucks him under her chin and lets him sob into her shirt.

He isn't sure how long it is before Lily drags him up to bed. She gets him out of his trousers and shoves him under the covers before putting a sleeping potion in his hand. He's grateful, downing it the second he has the cork out, welcoming the blissful emptiness of sleep.

He doesn't dream.

When he wakes there's light outside. Morning probably, James has never been one to sleep in. There's no sign of Lily, her side of the bed unused. His eyes are swollen, his throat sore. James manages to last a whole five minutes of being conscious, of remembering, before he goes to the bathroom and pulls out another sleeping potion, quickly tucking himself back into bed and drifting away again.

The next time his eyes open the sun is setting. According to the clock on the wall it's nearly 7:30. He lies in bed for a long time, staring at the ceiling. He feels hollow. And somehow still tired. He doesn't want to move. He doesn't want to be awake. He doesn't want to put one foot in front of the other. He doesn't want to get through this.

He does, eventually, manage to pull himself out of bed. Ruffling through his dirty clothes for a pair of track pants. The first floor is dark but there's a light on in the kitchen. He stops in the doorway when he sees Lily at the table, she's in an oversized grey jumper she always wears when she isn't feeling well, her hair piled on top of her head, a glass of water between her hands.

James hovers in the doorway, suddenly unsure if he's allowed to enter. "H—" he has to clear his throat, "hey," it still comes out scratchy and warn.

She's looking at the glass and not at him when she says: "You should eat."

"Probably," but he doesn't move. He's almost positive if he tries to eat he'll throw up. Won't make it past the second bite.

After a few more moments of stiff silence Lily sighs. “Well, if you’re not going to eat then sit down,” she gestures to the seat across from her. James tries to ignore the small itch in his chest as he sinks down into the chair.

Lily is chewing on her lower lip, expression serious before she brings the water to her mouth and takes a long sip. When the glass bottom hits the table again her eyes don’t follow it, finding James instead.

“Go on then. How exactly did you end up at Regulus Black’s house a few weeks ago, and why am I only finding out about this now?” her voice is steady, controlled. Dangerous.

James swallows, scratching at the tabletop, just to have something to do with his hands. “It was the day of the attack at the Ministry, Regulus was there, he got hurt pretty bad,” he does his best to push away the memories. To talk clinically. To not let himself think about what he’s actually saying.

“Kreacher—his house elf—he came and found me. Told me Regulus needed help. So I—so I went with him. Helped patch Regulus up.”

Lily’s stare is unwavering, James isn’t even sure she’s blinked. Her face a mask. He’s seen her like this before of course, it’s the way she looks in a fight. A duel.

“And then you fucked him, right?” she asks flatly.

“Lily—“

“No, don’t you say my name like I’m being unreasonable. You just told me a few weeks ago you nursed your Death Eater ex-boyfriend back to health after he tried to kill our friends, there is literally nothing I could say right now that could possibly be unreasonable.”

James takes a deep breath, nails digging into the table, “I didn’t fuck him,” he says eventually, voice cracking. He needs to keep it together. Lily deserves that much.

“You’re a terrible liar James.”

“I didn’t fuck him,” forcing the words out between his teeth. He sighs, closing his eyes briefly before opening them again. “But I—we kissed.”

At first Lily doesn’t react, but then she raises her glass. “Cheers.”

“Lily—“

“You sure do like saying my name. I hope it didn’t slip out while you were with your boyfriend, that would be well awkward wouldn’t it?”

James figures he deserves that.

After a few seconds he sighs, scrubbing at his face with his hands. He wishes he could stop here. Wishes he didn’t have more to say. Not now that it doesn’t even matter, now that

Regulus is d—he feels that thought get stuck in his throat, feels the ache it drags to the surface and attempts to shove it down again.

“I asked him to come back with me,” he’s staring at some distant spot on the floor when he says it, but he can feel Lily stiffen, feel the new tension crackle between them.

“Come back with you? Come back with you where? Here?” her voice has gone flat again.

This all feels so twisted now. He’d had this whole speech, been going over the words since he left Grimmauld, it wasn’t supposed to be this ugly.

“Yeah,” he croaks. “Yeah here.”

Silence.

And then she starts to laugh. It’s enough to make James look up, there’s a...manic quality to the laughter. Not the way it usually sounds. There’s no warmth in this. No joy. No comfort. He isn’t sure when she starts crying. When the tears start slipping from her eyes, and the subtle shift occurs from giggle to sob. He feels his whole body cave in.

“Oh Lily,” he says before he can stop himself.

She only shakes her head at him, getting to her feet and walking over to the counter, bracing her hands against it. He wants desperately to go to her, to gather her up in his arms, but he knows that’s about the last thing in the world she wants right now so he stays in his seat.

Several seconds pass before Lily inhales, her breath hitching slightly on the way out. “Sorry,” her voice is impressively steady, if not a little thick. “I told myself I wasn’t going to do that.”

“You don’t have to apologize to me.”

She lets out a dry laugh. “I know. I’m mostly apologizing to myself.”

He doesn’t know what to say to that so he just waits for her to keep going.

“What is this James?” she asks finally, she almost sounds scared. “We’re having a baby—fuck” she gasps like even saying that hurts right now, head dropping between her arms.

“What is going on?”

He doesn’t know.

That’s the reason he hasn’t been able to...talk about it.

He doesn’t know what this is.

What’s going on.

“I love you,” he manages finally, causing her to scoff, but he keeps going before she can react. “I love you,” he squeezes his eyes shut. “But I love him too.”

And it is love.

Love.

In the present.

Always.

Time or space or death.

It will always be love.

“So what was the plan James?” she still isn’t facing him. “You were just going to bring him back with you and...put him up in our guest room?”

“I don’t know.”

“Were you going to leave me?”

“No.”

“No? Just have someone else around for you to kiss then? When you got bored?”

“No,” James says frustrated. “I don’t know. I—Lily he was so lost. He needed help.”

She laughs, shaking her head and turning to face him. “Yeah, they always do don’t they? And we’re gonna be the ones to fix them right? To save them? That’s what we tell ourselves?”

“What are you talking about?”

She arches her brow. “You think I don’t know what it’s like to care about someone on the wrong side of this war?”

It takes James far too long to work out what she means. “Regulus isn’t Snape. Snape had a choice.”

“And so did Regulus. Sirius is proof of that.”

James only shakes his head. “It’s not that simple.”

“And things with Severus are?”

He grits his teeth. “Yes.”

“Because you don’t love him?” Lily asks coldly.

That question takes him off guard. “Are you telling me you’re in love with Snape?”

“Why?” razor sharp, eyes pinning James to his chair. When her words come she delivers them slowly, pushing each one in deep. “Would that hurt you?”

Yes, James thinks automatically. Realizing, of course, the hypocrisy of it.

“Can you imagine,” Lily goes on. “What you would have done if I invited Severus to come live with us? If I had kissed him?” James opens and closes his mouth, unable to answer.

It's different, his thoughts scream.

It is.

It has to be.

He doesn't say it.

He knows it isn't true.

Eventually he sighs, dropping his head into his hands, resting his elbows on his knees. “I'm sorry,” he says finally. “I know what a mess this is. I know how fucking unfair it is. I just—” his voice cuts out for a minute and he has to wait for it to come back. “I love you both so much. I just wanted you to be safe. I just wanted to take care of you.”

There's a long silence. It feels like neither of them is even breathing. Both holding themselves still, waiting for everything to shatter.

“You have such a big heart James,” Lily says eventually, which is not at all what he was expecting. He looks up, meeting her eyes. “Really, it's incredible, it is. But sometimes...” she trails off, shaking her head like she can't find the words, “sometimes you feel so much you forget to think. Sometimes James,” green eyes right on him, “you can be so fucking thoughtless.”

James doesn't manage to suppress his wince. “I know,” his voice splinters. “I'm sorry.”

It isn't enough.

Not even close.

After another endless stretch of silence that leaves James feeling mildly sick Lily sighs. She walks back to her chair but doesn't sit down, instead pulling something out from under the table. A bag. James's pulse starts racing.

“Lily?” he sounds desperate even to his own ears.

She slips the bag over her shoulder. “I'm going to go to Mary's for a bit. Until I can...sort this out.”

James feels something scrape along the inside of his stomach, hands trembling between his knees. He doesn't know what to say. He just knows that looking at her standing there with a bag swung over her shoulder makes him want to break things.

“Please,” he manages finally. “I don't want you to go.”

Her eyes are sad, maybe even a little wet, and after a few seconds she walks over, placing her hand on the back of his head and bending down to kiss his hair.

“Call someone okay?”

“Lily—“

“I don’t think you should be alone right now,” she pushes on, no longer looking at him. “I don’t want you to be alone. I just—it can’t be me James. Not this time.”

She’s walking away.

And he doesn’t know what to do.

Doesn’t know how to stop it.

“When will you be back?” he finds himself asking as she reaches the doorway. Her hand is gripping the strap of her bag so tightly he swears she’s going to snap it. They sit in silence for so long that James starts to feel a new anxiety bubbling under his skin.

“You—you are coming back, right?”

She hangs her head for a minute before looking at him over her shoulder. She gives him a weak smile but her eyes are glistening. “I don’t know.”

No.

No.

No.

“Look, I’m—I need to talk to someone,” her face screws up for a second. “I’m going to tell Mary what’s happened...is that okay?”

At first, in all the horribleness that’s happening inside him right now, James can’t understand what she’s asking. And then it hits him.

“Mary already knows,” and at the look on her face; “Not—just that we were together in school,” god it all hurts so much. “Marlene knows too, and I reckon Alice has a pretty good idea about it,” no point lying.

A small laugh falls from Lily’s mouth. Desperately sad. “James Potter and Regulus Black, the worst kept secret in the Wizarding World. But then, you never could love quietly,” he sees her mouth twitch and knows she’s trying not to cry. “I know that better than most people I imagine.”

“Lily,” he reaches for her.

Don’t leave.

Don't go.

He wants to get down on his knees and beg.

But she only shakes her head. "I'll see you James."

He can't speak. Can't move. Watches her walk away. Listens as the front door slams behind her.

He's lost them both.

After all of that.

He's lost them both.

He goes back to bed. Pulls the blankets around himself and buries himself deep. You'd think sleeping would be hard, considering he can't possibly be tired, but it isn't. The minute his head hits the pillow the warm dark creeps up and pulls him under. It reminds him vaguely of something Madam Pomfrey said once, when she was talking about Remus waking up after his transformations: *it helps if you want to wake up. Want to come back to yourself.*

James doesn't want either of those things.

When his eyes do eventually blink open they're heavy and crusted. He reaches up to wipe them clean, his whole body aching. He doesn't know what time it is. Or what day honestly. The curtains are drawn so he can't see if it's light or dark outside. For a while he just lies there, hoping he'll be able to drift away again, but when it becomes apparent that that isn't going to happen he forces himself to sit up.

The room is dark and stale. He smells like sweat, his mouth dry. He can't remember the last time he ate or showered. Two days? Or has it been three? Eventually his eyes find the clock on the wall. 5:00 AM it tells him. Did Lily leave last night? The night before?

He pulls himself out of bed, dots prickling across his vision as he gets momentarily light headed, walking on unsteady legs down the hall to the bathroom and turning on the shower. He makes the water burn the way he always did after a bad Quidditch match. The pain of the scalding water on his skin feels good. He stands in it until the water starts to go cold, then pulls himself out, drying quickly and not bothering to look in the mirror. He doesn't want to see himself.

He dresses in a Quidditch jumper and baggy tracky bottoms, before heading downstairs. The light in the kitchen is still on. Lily's water glass still sitting on the table. He stares at it for a while before picking it up and throwing it—perhaps a bit aggressively—into the sink.

He needs to eat something, he's already feeling like he's going to pass out but impossibly he still isn't hungry. He makes some toast anyway. Butters it and forces it down his throat. It's

the only thing he can manage.

After he finishes he just sits at the table for a while. Staring into space. He still feels like he's asleep in some ways. His brain, his body—tired and sluggish. Everything a little bit dull. A little bit fuzzy. Eventually he forces himself to get up, to go call Sirius. To make sure he's okay. He tries the flat but no one answers. Not Sirius. Not Remus. After that he tries Peter just—just because he could use a friendly face. But there's no answer there either.

He ends up returning to the bedroom, still with the curtains drawn and the lights out. Still dark even though it must be nearly mid-morning by now. He stands in front of the door, not really knowing what to do, until his eyes snag on the dresser. It's a bad idea, he knows that even before he starts moving, but it doesn't stop him.

He throws open the first drawer, scrambling around for the box hidden at the back, feeling his breath hitch when his fingers wrap around it. He holds it gently in his hand, thumb running over the smooth wooden lid as he stumbles back until he's sitting down on the end of his bed.

He remembers when Reg gave this to him. Remembers it so clearly.

Did you get me a present?

Don't make this into a big thing.

That's adorable.

Fuck you.

Oh my god you were going to wrap it and everything! Did you get me a bow?

I honestly hate you so much.

Nah, I don't think so. You don't get Christmas gifts for people you hate.

He should never have let him go home that Christmas. He should have put him in a full-body bind. Should have carried him to Godric's Hollow over his shoulder.

It wouldn't have mattered,

mutters the voice in his head.

He already had the Mark by then.

Well then he shouldn't have let him go home for the summer. Or the Christmas before. He should have listened to his mother. Should have gone and gotten him the minute Sirius showed up on his doorstep.

"Fuck," the tears have started again and he wipes at them uselessly with his sleeve. "Fuck Reg." He opens the lid, the little red ball sitting there, J R proudly facing out.

I want to give you everything James.

Everything.

With a shaking hand James reaches for it, but the minute he touches it he knows something is wrong. He lets it roll into his palm, watches it sit there. Motionless.

It's the magic.

The magic is gone.

James wraps it up tightly in his hand, lying back on the bed and curling in on himself, the wooden box dropping to the ground as he clutches the ball to his chest.

Eventually he manages to fall asleep again.

He still has no idea how much time has passed. Everything blurs together, none of the lines of his life clear. But when he manages to pull himself out of bed again Lily still isn't home. The house is still empty. The kitchen light still on. The Quaffle still refusing to fly. James slips it into his pocket. He thinks it's morning again but he can't be sure. Forces himself to scarf down another buttered piece of toast.

He tries Sirius, but there's still no answer at the flat. He considers calling Mary's but he knows that would be a mistake. Lily needs space. He owes her that. He's about to go back to bed when something tapping at the kitchen window catches his attention.

He finds a very irate owl waiting for him, holding today's paper in its mouth and standing on yesterday's neglected copy.

"Sorry," James says when he opens the window, relieving the owl of his delivery. He's a small, auburn coloured thing and he glares mutinously at James, stamping his clawed feet on yesterday's paper.

"Yeah, yeah, I know—er—" he looks around, fumbling for the can of owl treats they keep by the window. "Here you go," he offers up a generous handful which seems to have the bird mollified. Or at least he doesn't peck James's eyes out before he flies off, which James counts as a win.

He throws both papers on the table, halfway out of the room when something starts nagging at him. So he picks up one of the copies and skims through it. Not entirely sure what he's looking for until he finds it: a tiny box at the bottom of one of the last pages. An obituary. There's no picture, no fanfare, nothing like it should be considering the importance of the subject.

Regulus A. Black

is bolded at the top of the small paragraph of text which reads:

Died in tragic accident, survived by his two parents: Walburga and Orion Black. Regulus was a Hogwarts Prefect and Seeker for the Slytherin Quidditch team. He will be dearly missed by all who knew him. His final resting place is to be the family crypt in Highgate Cemetery, London.

And that's it.

That's all there is.

James stares at that square for a long time, hands shaking. After all that Walburga did to him, all she put him through, all he gave up for her—this is all she gives him? He isn't sure why he's surprised.

Before he knows what he's doing James drops the paper back down on the table and heads for the door. Grabbing his jacket as he slips outside. Apparating as soon as he's passed the wards.

You can't Apparate into cemeteries directly, of course. It only took one person ending up in an empty grave for that restriction to be put in place, so James finds himself on the pavement outside of Highgate. The front entrance looks almost like a castle—made of grey stone with tiny turrets above the gate. All very medieval.

James walks forward, not knowing exactly where he's headed, except that he's looking for a mausoleum with the Black family name on it. It's cold and James pulls his jacket more firmly around himself, the ground beneath his feet covered in a light dusting of snow. He walks through rows of headstones, along the winding gravel pathways, everything looking like it's from another time. Even the trees, now bare without their leaves, have an ancient quality to them—to their thick twisting trunks and reaching branches that seem almost to be guarding the bodies below them.

He isn't sure how long he's walking for before he sees it—a small rectangular stone building, columns on either side of the door which has a stained glass window making up the top half. It shows a snake. That's what catches his eye first, the dim light sparkling off the green glass. And then his eyes travel up to the ornately carved name above;

Black

It's only when he's standing in front of it that he realizes he has no idea why he's come. Regulus isn't even here. And maybe that's for the best. This place looks fucking depressing. Besides, Regulus was never meant to be shut-up underground. He always belonged in the sky.

"You're late," a voice croaks, thin and frail and barely carried on the wind. "The funeral was yesterday."

James turns around to see an old man being pushed towards him by a vaguely familiar looking girl with dark brown hair. When her eyes meet James's she gasps.

"James Potter?"

It takes him a minute to place her. He knows they went to school together but he didn't have many interactions with Cerci Greengrass, only vaguely knew her as a Prefect and Regulus's friend. His eyes drop back down to the old man—thin, wispy strands of white hair haloing his head.

“Er—hi.” He hadn't expected to run into anyone and he isn't exactly sure what to do now. Cerci is currently looking at him like she thinks he's some kind of hallucination and he's trying to remember whether or not he should be afraid of her. He feels like as a general rule it's best to be afraid of most of Reg's friends.

“What are you doing here?” she asks, she hasn't moved since she spotted him so her and the old man are still several feet away.

“I'm...” but he doesn't know what to say. Doesn't want to tell them anything because, well, Reg never wanted anyone to know about them. It feels wrong somehow, to break his trust, even now. Maybe especially now. James grits his teeth as something aching hollows out his chest.

“He's here for my son, yes? At least one of them,” the old man squints. “Though which one I'm not sure.”

James feels his mouth go dry. “Your son?” he repeats.

The last time he saw Orion Black in the flesh he was maybe seven or eight. At some Ministry function his father dragged him to a few years before he went to Hogwarts. Orion had felt like a giant to James then; six-five, head and shoulders above everyone else, and strong too, like a Quidditch player, a beater—broad shoulders pressing against the fabric of his robes. His hair had been dark and slicked back, his face full, square, solid.

The man before him now is...unrecognizable.

Cerci seems to wake up all of the sudden because she starts pushing him forward again. Orion's eyes firmly on the mausoleum in front of them, Cerci's still firmly on James. Her gaze has taken on a new scrutinizing quality he doesn't appreciate.

“You're Fleamont's boy?” Orion says, as they stop beside him.

James blinks, surprised by the question. “Er—yeah.”

Orion nods slowly. “I liked Fleamont.” James snorts before he can stop himself, earning him a sidelong look from Orion. The old man's lips twitch upward. “Not personally, perhaps, but he was smart, which is more than I can say for most people, and he was honest. Blunt. Never afraid of me. I appreciated that as well.”

James just stares at him, knowing full well his father would have hated being anything that Orion Black appreciated.

“It's a shame,” the old man goes on, “what happened to him and your mother.”

It's work for James to restrain himself from reacting the way he wants to. Which would be by decking Orion in the face.

"It wasn't a natural disaster," he says finally, voice tight, causing Orion to look up at him. "It didn't just happen. It was done. They were poisoned. Though I expect you know that."

Orion holds his gaze, a shell of the intimidating man he once was. Regulus had cared deeply for his father, James knows that, it's unfortunate that his father didn't care as much for him. That he couldn't bring himself to protect his sons.

"I merely meant that things could have been different," Orion says finally.

James nods, barely restraining his anger. "That's why we're here isn't it?" he gestures to the building in front of them and Orion's eyes follow him.

"Yes," he says quietly. "I suppose it is."

They stand in silence, staring at the gothic structure, a few hundred years old at least, rust and mold gathering in the sharp corners, making the stone darker.

"You never did say who you were here for," Orion goes on eventually. "Sirius or Regulus?" James looks down at him.

"Sirius isn't dead." Even suggesting he could be sends a spark of fear shooting through James's chest. "And if he was I wouldn't bring him here."

"That's good to know, though it isn't what I meant," Orion says, and then, after a moment, "Sirius has always needed you to do a great deal for him. It would not surprise me if he needed you to mourn his brother for him as well."

For the second time James has to resist the urge to punch him. Cerci must sense this because he notices her shifting Orion's chair slightly further away from him.

"What the hell makes you think you know anything about Sirius?"

Watery grey eyes meet James's and he's struck, suddenly, by how much they look alike. All of them.

"He's my son."

James stares at him. "No," he says after a few seconds. "He's Fleamont's son."

There's a flare of something in Orion's eyes but James can't tell what—anger? Pain? Orion might have his sons' eyes but the rest of his face is nothing like them. Full of feelings, lines crisscrossing, scars telling stories. There is so much emotion woven into Orion's features that James feels overwhelmed. Doesn't know which one's he's caused and which ones were already there.

"So you're not here for Sirius then," the old man says eventually, voice slightly more strained.

“No.”

“You’re here for Regulus,” no longer a question, but James answers anyway.

“Yes.”

The two men continue to stare at one another, neither backing down or looking away. Orion is now regarding James with the same scrutiny he’s been receiving from Cerci this whole time.

“Regulus told me once,” the old man finally goes on, “about a boy he was in love with.”

And that.

That James wasn’t expecting.

He didn’t think Regulus had ever told anyone about them. Let alone his father. It makes him feel wrong footed. The floor under him tilting somewhat.

“What?” because it’s all he can manage.

Orion either doesn’t hear him or chooses to ignore him, pressing on; “He told me that this boy was kind and honourable and handsome.”

“He used pretty with me,” Cerci pipes up, and James looks at her.

Both of them? Regulus told both of them?

Suddenly James is having trouble breathing again, and he doesn’t want to completely lose it. Not here. Not in front of Orion Black of all people. But this grief is still fresh and he hasn’t figured out how to hold it yet.

He takes a few steps away, turning his back to them and grabbing hold of his knees. His breaths come in short gasps as James desperately tries to push the stinging in his eyes away. He needs to be stronger than this. What is he gonna do when Sirius comes home? Remus? Lily? He needs to have it together.

He feels a gentle hand press between his shoulder blades and when he looks up he sees Cerci standing beside him.

“Slow now,” she says softly. “Breathe in with me yeah?” She inhales and James follows. She exhales and James follows. Once. Twice. Three times.

“I didn’t think he told anyone,” his voice makes it out somehow. “I didn’t think he wanted anyone to know. He never wanted me to tell anyone I thought...” he squeezes his eyes shut.

What had he thought? What does it matter? Hardly their biggest problem. Or maybe it was. Because as long as Regulus wanted to keep them a secret it meant that he didn’t want things to change. Didn’t want to jeopardize his place here, in this world. It meant he didn’t want

something different with James. Or if he did, he was too afraid to do anything more than dream about it. It meant he thought they were doomed.

“Ah well, Regulus was always a bit of a dragon with his feelings wasn’t he?” Cerci says, hand still on James’s back even as he straightens up. When he stares at her she explains; “Guarded them like gold.”

James manages to laugh wetly. “Not always.”

Cerci’s eyes soften. “No,” she says quietly. “Not always.”

“You managed to make both my boys fall in love with you James Potter,” Orion draws their attention back to him, sitting in front of the crypt that has no more of Regulus than his name but is still somehow the closest any of them can get to him now. “You’ll have to tell me your secret.”

James doesn’t respond, certain he couldn’t manage anything civil. Instead he turns towards the mausoleum, eyes running over the decrepit exterior one more time before he lifts his wand. Flowers begin to sprout from the snowy ground, bright and colourful, vines with small blossoms pouring from the roof and wrapping around the pillars. He makes the stained glass shine.

“It’s beautiful,” Cerci says quietly from beside him.

Finally, he faces Orion again, the old man watching him intently. “Regulus deserved better than this,” and he doesn’t just mean the crypt. He means all of it. It wasn’t fair, childish as it might be to say, everything he went through, it wasn’t fair. Someone should have stopped it. Someone should have helped. He doesn’t know why he didn’t—why he failed. It’s all muddled in his brain now. How he let this happen.

Orion is quiet for a long time, tongue running over his cracked lips. “We do our best.”

“Was this your best?” James asks, nodding his head towards the grave, watching the old man wince. “Because it sure as hell wasn’t mine.”

He watches as Orion’s grey eyes bounce around, agitated, anxious, watches him fidget in his seat. Cerci walks over to him, places a comforting hand on his shoulder, but Orion barely seems to notice her.

“I tried to...to show them how to...navigate this world. But I could never save Sirius from himself. In the end...I could not save Regulus either.”

James stares at him. “I don’t think it was themselves they needed saving from.”

“Yes, well, you are young. You do not understand that you cannot simply do whatever you want or have whatever you want. Life is treacherous and you must be smarter than that. You must...how do you say...” his brow furrows, frustrated with himself. “If you wish to survive in this world you must never forget who the gods are and your place next to them. My sons...” sadness fills his eyes. “Regulus forgot.”

The wind rattles through the naked branches surrounding them and James sees Orion shiver, sees Cerci murmur a quiet warming charm, sees the dampness on the old man's cheeks.

"Voldemort isn't a god."

That makes Orion laugh. "You don't think so?" he asks amused. "I have seen many things but never anything like him. He has the world on its knees. Power beyond anything we have ever seen. You believe he is just like you or I? Truly? Just a man?"

James grits his teeth. "Yes."

"And what about Albus Dumbledore then? Is he nothing but a man? Do you not make sacrifices at his alter, hoping he will keep you safe? Protect the people you love?"

James flounders for a moment. "He doesn't make us sacrifice things to him."

"No?" still with that same dark amusement. "You make all your own decisions? You follow all your own orders? He does not tell you where or how to be?"

James opens and closes his mouth, frustrated when he finds himself with nothing to say. Trying not to think of all the secrets that exist between him and his friends at Dumbledore's request. Of all the days that someone is missing and no one knows if they're dead or just on a mission. How little control they have over their own lives.

Orion nods, taking his silence as confirmation. "Be careful mon fils, you would do well to remember what power you play with. If not for your own sake than for your father's."

That catches James off guard, every mention of his parents making his heart feel tender. Delicate. More than it did already. "My dad is dead," he says, unable to further explain himself. That nothing he does can hurt his parents now. Can help them. Can heal them.

Orion smiles sadly. "I could be in the depths of Hades, and I promise you I would still feel the loss of my boys like a dagger in my heart."

He doesn't know if Sirius has any idea that his father still feels this way, to this day. That he talks about his sons. Plural, always. That he doesn't deny him the way that Regulus's obituary did. The way Walburga seems to. But then, if Orion loves him, it makes it all so much more egregious. Because how do you let someone you love be torn apart the way Sirius was? The way Regulus was? How do you stand by and do nothing?

James would fight the heavens if he needed to.

If that's what it took.

To keep them safe.

Let the gods come.

They've been standing in the cold for a while, small snowflakes beginning to peel off the clouds overhead, James's hands going numb. He gives the mausoleum one last look but

doesn't feel anything. Whatever he was looking for it isn't here. Regulus isn't here.

"I should go," he says finally, not sure if it's necessary. "It was...interesting meeting you," he gives Cerci a curt nod as he starts walking away, hands shoved in his pockets.

"Will you tell Sirius—"

"No," James cuts Orion off before he can start, looking back at the old man from the gravel path. "If you have something to say to him he deserves the courtesy of hearing it from your mouth. I'm not passing along messages."

There's a small pause before Orion smiles. "C'est bon. You will protect him yes?"

"With my life."

"That is all I can ask."

"I'm not doing it for you," James says shortly, but Orion doesn't seem bothered, only nodding his head.

"Goodbye James Potter, I doubt very much we shall speak again."

James has nothing to say to that, so he pushes through the snow, teeth starting to chatter as he heads for the gates.

"Wait!"

It isn't Orion causing him to pause this time—Cerci Greengrass running up the path towards him.

"Wait," she huffs, breath coming out in great clouds as she stumbles to a stop in front of him, her cheeks flushed, Orion watching them in the distance.

"I have something for you," she's barely able to get the words out.

James arches his brow. "For me?"

She nods. "I've been boxing up some of his stuff, for his parents," she goes on. "And I found a letter—I didn't know who it was for, he didn't use a full name, but it's addressed to J and... well, I assume that's you?"

James's stomach drops. "A letter—Regulus wrote me a letter?"

I have something for you.

I thought about writing one for every day, but it seemed excessive.

"Can you wait for me? I just have to take him home," she gestures to Orion over her shoulder. "But if you go to Grimmauld I'll meet you there."

I'm not sure I understand...

Well I know—I know I can't send you post, over the summer, so, I thought I'd give them to you now.

Cerci waves her hand in front of his face. "James?"

He blinks, his head feeling heavy. "Sorry? What?"

She gives him a curious look but doesn't question it. "12 Grimmauld, you know where that is?"

He almost laughs. "Yeah," gruffly. "I know where that is."

"So you'll wait for me? It won't take me long to Apparate Mr. Black back to Scotland and then I can give you the letter."

They're all dated so you can read them like I'm sending them to you in real time. I just thought...I didn't want you to be alone all summer. Maybe that's dumb—actually—now that I'm saying it out loud it's definitely dumb. Sorry, you don't have to—

"I'll wait for you," he manages to get out.

Cerci nods, snow peppering her dark hair. "Good. I think he'd want that," something sad flashes across her face but in the next moment she's gone, jogging back to Orion's side.

Thank you. I love them. I love you.

James feels uneasy standing outside Grimmauld Place. The scratching of grief in his chest growing more insistent, his brain dragging up images of the last time he was here. He bounces impatiently back and forth between his feet, trying to keep them from going numb. His teeth chattering so hard they nearly chop his tongue in half once or twice. He could cast a warming charm, he's not sure why he doesn't. The windows of Grimmauld watching him.

He starts at the sound of a "pop" turning his head to find Cerci walking down the pavement towards him.

"Sorry, Walburga is sometimes a little challenging to get away from."

James can't help the snort that comes out of him. The fucking irony. "So I've noticed," he says dryly.

Cerci only nods, gesturing to the house in front of them and sighing. "Well, shall we?" she takes a step towards it but James shakes his head.

"I'll wait here," he eyes the building before looking away, the thought of stepping inside there again right now makes his stomach drop.

He sees the question on Cerci's face and then he sees her swallow it. She looks back at the house and James thinks she's going to keep going but she doesn't. "He told me you took him on a date to a waterfall once, is that true?"

James blinks, the question coming so out of left field he's not even sure he really heard it. "I—he called it a date?"

She shoots him a look. "Was it not one?"

"I mean—yes—I just...I don't know, I didn't think he'd see it that way." Apparently James understood very little about how Regulus saw them. He wishes he could talk to him one more time. Or two more times. Or a thousand more times. That he could hear all of this from him.

Cerci considers James for a moment before speaking again. "Regulus saw good things as being fragile. Talk too much about them and they're more likely to break. But you should know, that when he let himself take you out, the way his face would brighten," she shakes her head, smiling. "I'd never seen him like that. So I don't know if he somehow managed to make you think this thing between you wasn't precious to him, but I promise you it was."

James's whole body has gone tense with the effort of not falling apart, not crumbling to pieces on the side of the road. Somehow he manages to nod stiffly. "Thank you," he practically whispers.

"Of course," Cerci replies, in a similarly soft tone. "Well, I'll just go get that letter shall I?" she takes the front steps two at a time, the door practically swinging open for her when she gets to the top.

"Hello Kreacher," James can hear her sing before it closes again.

James exhales, eyes shutting briefly as he tries to fight back the overwhelming desire to cease existing. To fight back the parts of him that are certain he will never find his way out of this pain.

His eyes snap back open at the sound of the door closing again. Cerci doesn't bother to look both ways before she jogs across the street, an envelope in her hand.

"Well," she says when she reaches him, "here we are then."

James stares at it for a minute, stomach tangling itself in knots before he's finally able to reach out a shaking hand. He sees it there, scrawled across the front. No address, no name. Just the letter J.

"Do you know when he wrote this?" he asks, staring down at it, held delicately between his two hands.

"No, I mean, I can guess. But I don't know for sure."

His eyes flick up to her. "Guess then." Because if it's before—before Kreacher brought him here, before everything that happened on that day, James doesn't know if he'll be able to bear

reading it.

But then, maybe he won't be able to bear it either way.

"A few days before he died—well, before he disappeared in any case—we came across some love letters. Regulus was a little obsessed with them," she smiles again. "In the letters, the author only ever used initials for him and his lover, so.."

She trails off, gestures to the front of the envelope.

J

James thinks of the wall back at Hogwarts.

Thinks of the Quaffle in his back pocket.

Somehow, it feels so wrong. To see the J all on its own.

Stupid thing to think.

He shakes his head, slipping the letter into his jacket. "Thank you," he says to Cerci, meeting her warm brown eyes.

She nods. "Like I said, I think he would have wanted this. I'm glad I found you."

He wracks his brain for memories of her at school but he still can't come up with much. He knows Regulus mentioned her but he can't think of anything specific.

"You cared about him," he says, a bit redundantly, but Cerci doesn't seem to mind.

"More than anything," there's the smallest fraying at the ends of her words, though the smile doesn't slip from her face. "He was my partner."

James has no idea how to take that. Honestly he isn't sure he wants to know. "I'm glad that—" his voice breaks and he has to force himself to press forward. "I'm glad that he had you. That he wasn't...alone...in there," he nods towards the house in front of him.

For the first time he sees her mask crack, pain flooding her eyes. "I should have been here more."

James almost laughs. "Yeah, well," he clears his throat. "We all should have been. Fat lot of good that does him now."

Cerci looks at him pityingly, and he can't stand the idea of whatever it is she's going to say next to try and make him feel better. Try and make either of them feel better. When he isn't sure they deserve to.

"Thank you, again, for the letter," he says briskly, and before anymore can be said he's throwing himself through space. Desperate to get as far away from that house as he fucking can.

His aim is a little off. It happens when he's upset. Or drunk. So he ends up a few streets over instead of in front of his house. Exhausted and cursing himself, he flicks the collar of his jacket up against the wind and crosses his arms over his chest, tucking his hands in to shield them from the cold. Too afraid to use his pockets. To crush the letter. To touch it. He swears he can feel it weighing him down, even though he knows that's irrational.

He spends most of the walk staring at the ground, so he doesn't notice that someone's waiting for him until he's half-way to his front door. Looking up and stopping dead in his tracks.

"Hey," Frank says, getting up off the steps. James just stares at him—probably for longer than is socially acceptable.

"Er—" Frank bounces on the balls of his feet. "Any chance we could talk inside? I'm kinda freezing here."

That wakes James up. "Right. Yeah. Of course, sorry." He doesn't know why his voice sounds like that—all choked up. Well, okay, he does know. Because he's fucking lonely. Because he's so glad that Frank is here.

He fumbles a bit with the door, feeling entirely twisted up and all over the place and too fucking raw.

"You know," Frank says as he steps inside, stamping his boots clean on the welcome mat.
"You really need to increase the strength of your wards, I was able to just walk right up here."

"Well yeah, you're keyed in," James shrugs his coat off, hanging it on one of the hooks by the front door and enjoying the momentary relief of finally being somewhere warm. He eyes his coat pocket for a minute but decides he'd rather not have to explain the letter to Frank.

"I'm keyed into your wards?" Frank sounds surprised, following James into the kitchen.
"I've only been here twice."

"Three times now," James says, opening the fridge and pulling out two bottles of butterbeer. He offers one to Frank who is looking, James thinks, unreasonably aghast.

"James, how many people are keyed into your wards?" he asks very seriously. They sit down at the table.

"I don't know," James shrugs. "Fifteen? Twenty?"

"Twenty! Have you not read any of the safety protocol the Order sent out?"

"Er...I think I read the first few?" In truth, he read "Safety Protocol" and then immediately put it down.

“Merlin,” Frank looks genuinely distressed. “You aren’t supposed to have more than five people keyed into your wards at a time.”

“What? That’s ridiculous,” he takes a sip of his drink and then; “Wait, does that mean I’m not keyed into your wards?”

Frank rolls his eyes. “You shouldn’t be—“

“Oi!”

“—but Alice isn’t exactly following protocol either.”

That sounds about right.

James snorts. “I’ve always liked that girl.”

“Yeah well, it’s an ongoing discussion.”

James gives him a skeptical look. “Is it though?”

Frank doesn’t bother responding, grumbling something about the importance of following rules in times like these while he sips on his bottle.

“So,” James says, once a somewhat awkward silence has fallen over them.

Frank meets his stare. “So.”

“You’re here.”

“Yeah.”

James looks down, passing his bottle back and forth between his palms. “Lily send you?” Because it’s the only reason he can think of for Frank just turning up here out of the blue.

“Yeah,” Frank says cautiously. “Alice is over at Mary’s right now but, when they called Lily asked if I’d come check up on you so...”

“So you came.”

“So I came.”

There’s another pause and then, still looking at his bottle: “Did she...say anything else?” he feels something like fear swell up inside him. Of all the people he’s never wanted to let down, Frank is pretty high on the list. If you’d asked him at eleven who he looked up to the most he would have said Frank. He’s not sure the answer is much different now.

“No,” Frank says. “No, I—I mean obviously I know that something is going on between the two of you but...she didn’t tell me the specifics.”

James sags with relief, though he still can’t quite make himself look up. After a few moments of silence Frank finally speaks again.

“I—listen, I know it isn’t any of my business, but I want to—I want to help, if I can. But it’s hard to help if I don’t know what’s happened?”

James lets out a shaky exhale. “Thing is—“ he starts, but his voice is too strained, snapping right away. He takes another drink, anything to give himself more time. “I’m worried,” he manages eventually. He means to say more but somehow it doesn’t make it out.

“About what?” Frank asks gently.

He laughs without humour. “That if I tell you...you won’t—“ he grimaces, frustrated with himself, with the broken shaky way his words are climbing out of his mouth. “I just...” eyes closed. “I don’t want to disappoint you.”

The silence seems endless, James keeping his eyes closed, hands gripping the bottle in front of him like that will somehow keep him anchored.

“James,” something about the way Frank says his name reminds James so much of his mother that he very nearly cracks in two, “you could never disappoint me.”

It takes a minute for him to recover from that before he’s able to let out a shaky laugh. “Liar,” he forces his eyes open, forces himself to look up. “I could miss an open hoop in a tied game against Slytherin.”

Frank laughs too. “Yeah okay, you COULD do that. But you would never.”

“No,” James agrees, “never.” He swallows, feeling his face fall again. “I fucked up Frank.”

The other boy nods. “Okay.”

“I—I just wanted—“ he shakes his head, back here again. Back to what he wanted. Back to not knowing what the fuck he thought he was doing. What the fuck he thinks he’s doing now. “I hurt people,” he says finally. Because it’s true. Lily. Regulus. He hurt them both in the end. He failed them both. “I think I’m the villain in this story.”

“You’re not the villain.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I know that villains don’t think they’re the villains. They do the most horrific, immoral things imaginable and they convince themselves that that makes them the hero. You think Voldemort thinks he’s the bad guy? You have to care about people in order to feel guilt. Villains? Real villains? It never even crosses their minds to care about the people they’ve hurt.” And when James doesn’t respond;

“You’re not a villain James. You fucked up? Okay. You hurt people? Okay. But that doesn’t make you a villain. It just makes you a person.”

James shakes his head, not willing to accept that. Not yet. “I think my mum would be fucking ashamed of me,” he admits miserably, a thought that’s been bouncing around in his head for a

while now. “I don’t know what I’m doing. I just wanted to keep him safe. I don’t know how I got it all so wrong.”

He doesn’t know when he started crying. Hates that he has. Embarrassment flushing his cheeks.

“Jesus kid,” he hears Frank stand up. “You’re killing me here.”

He’s at James’s side a minute later, pulling him to his feet and into his arms.

“James? Listen to me okay?” and when James just snuffles Frank pulls back, holding his face in his hands. “You are not a bad person. You might have done bad things but that doesn’t make you bad.”

“I’m supposed to be better than that,” his voice wobbles pathetically. “I’m supposed to be better.”

“Says who?”

“Everyone. Everyone says it. I’m supposed to be James Potter. But I don’t even know who the fuck that is anymore.”

He sounds like such a little kid. Feels like one, when he sees the pity on Frank’s face.

“You’re not even twenty-one years old James, you’ve just lost your parents, you’re in the middle of this shit show of a war. Cut yourself some slack.”

But Frank doesn’t understand. Understand who James is supposed to be.

“They need me,” he almost whines. “I have to—I can’t be like this. I can’t be this person. They need me to be James Potter.”

“You are James Potter.”

“No, no I’m not. I used to be, maybe, but not anymore. Maybe not for a long time. And I have to—nothing would be falling apart if I could just be that person. Remus and Sirius and Peter and Lily and Re—nothing would be falling apart. Because James Potter would fix it. So I just, I have to be him again. I have to be him. And then I’ll be able to fix it.”

“James, breathe.”

That’s the second time today someone’s had to tell him to do that.

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry. Just breathe.”

“I’ll figure it out. I always figure it out. I can do this.”

“James, the only thing you have to do right now is breathe so just shut up and inhale for me okay?”

“Okay.”

“Okay.”

And he does. Because he always listens to Frank eventually, even if he gives him shit for it first. Always trusts him to know what to do. So he inhales. And then he exhales. Inhale. Exhale. Wash, rinse and repeat.

“Better?” Frank asks after a few minutes, his hands have dropped from James’s face to his shoulders.

James nods. “Sorry.”

“Don’t. Don’t apologize. I—Merlin, I’m sorry.”

James blinks, surprised. “What?”

Frank sighs, running a hand through his hair. “Your parents died. Your parents died and I should have been here.”

“You came to the funeral.”

“That’s not what I mean,” he sighs again. “I knew that you weren’t going to take care of yourself and I should have been here. I should have made you let some of that weight you’ve been carrying around go. Some of that responsibility. It’s too much James. You need to put some of it down because you’re eating yourself alive.”

James doesn’t know what to do with any of that. His brain all foggy. “That—that isn’t your job,” he manages finally.

Frank gives him a weak smile. “Yeah, it is. You’re family. I should have been checking in. This shouldn’t be the third time I’m visiting. I got caught up in—in everything. But you get to need people too, James. You certainly get to need me.”

It shouldn’t mean so much, hearing those words, it’s not like he doesn’t know it. Deep down somewhere. Not like he doesn’t understand that he’s allowed to ask for things. It’s just that it doesn’t always...feel that way. It’s just that he knows that no one expects him to. Sometimes it feels like no one wants him to.

But he can’t quite bring himself to say any of that out loud so instead he shakes his head, pushing gently on Frank’s shoulder. “Merlin, fuck off, you’re just trying to make me cry again.”

Frank smiles, “I promise it’s very much the opposite,” and then, after a brief pause: “I think there are things you need to say?”

James feels his heart squeeze, the anxiety scratching against his skin again. “Yeah.”

Frank nods, “But first, have you eaten?”

That takes James by surprise. “Er—toast, this morning I think?”

“Merlin, sit down, I’m making food,” Frank turns towards the kitchen. “You have pasta somewhere here? Tomato sauce? Garlic?”

“Yeah, cupboards next to the sink.”

“Excellent.”

Sitting at the table watching Frank cook is probably the best James has felt in days. Maybe weeks. Maybe since his parents died. It’s the comfort of feeling, for a moment, as though someone else is in control. That they have things in hand. That everything is going to be okay.

James puts on one of Lily’s records and Frank whistles while he boils and chops, his cooking a weird mix between muggle and wizard techniques. He talks to James about nothing—his mother’s garden, the Cannons’s new seeker, an article on a specific broom polish he read—it’s nice.

There’s a knock at the door.

Both of them freeze, looking down the hall like they’ll be able to see through the walls of the house.

“Do you know who that is?” Frank asks, shoulders pulling back, face serious as he jumps into Auror mode.

“Sure,” James says, walking towards the door. “It’s one of the twenty people keyed into our wards.”

“Jesus Christ James—wait, you can’t just go opening the door!”

“Frank relax, I doubt that Voldemort knocks,” James says as he swings open the front door and feels himself startled into stillness for the second time that day.

For a moment there’s a weird merging of the past and the present. Of Sirius standing on his doorstep, looking absolutely fucking heartbroken at fifteen. And Sirius standing on his doorstep now, looking nearly the same.

“Hey,” Sirius says, sheepishly, like he isn’t sure if he should be there. “I’ve been at Andy’s but I was kind of over staying my welcome. I just couldn’t stand the idea of going back to that empty goddamn flat so I...So I came here. Is that...is that alright?”

For a second James just stands there and then he's wrapping his arms around his best mate. "That's a stupid fucking question and you know it," James says, partially into his shoulder.

Sirius laughs. "Sorry, you're right, I'm an idiot."

"Completely moronic."

"Absolute dunce."

"Fucking pea brain."

"Dummy."

"Dummy?" James asks, pulling back. "Really?"

"Oh come on, it's no worse than pea brain."

James's mouth twitches upward. "I like pea brain, very visual."

"James?" comes a concerned voice from inside.

James rolls his eyes. "It's alright Frank, I'm not dead, it's only Sirius."

"Frank?" Sirius asks. "Why is Frank here?"

James's budding mood flickers. "It's fucking freezing," he says instead of answering. "Come in yeah? Frank's almost done supper."

Sirius arches his brow as he lets James usher him inside. "Frank can cook?"

"Apparently."

The warm smells wafting from the kitchen envelope them as James closes the door. Him and Lily have been too busy lately for much cooking. For much of anything really. The house feels more alive with the smells and sounds of dinner being made. James half expects to see his mother and Mimi when he walks back into the kitchen.

"Sirius," Frank says by way of greeting, his back to them as he stirs something, "can you tell James he needs to up his security measures? He has twenty bloody people keyed into these wards."

Sirius turns to James, brow raised. "Twenty? Really? And to think, you used to be popular."

James rolls his eyes, shoving Sirius who shoves him right back.

"Oi! Not near the food!" Frank says as he desperately tries to protect the pasta he's plating.

"What did you make?" Sirius reaches over and swipes his finger along the top of the tomato sauce, earning him a smack to the back of the head.

"Were you raised in a barn!" Frank demands.

“Victorian mansion sadly, a barn would’ve been wicked though.”

Frank lets out an exasperated sigh, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Will the two of you just sit down please?”

James and Sirius exchange a look. “Think we’re bothering him?” James asks.

“What? Us? Can’t be. We’re a delight.”

“You’re right, must be something else. We should probably stay close.”

“Good call Prongs. I reckon the closer the better,” they both inch nearer to Frank, coming at him from either side.

“Oh—Jesus,” Frank curses as they crowd him, poking and flicking, and generally just making the older boy squirm. “I forgot that you lot were like this.”

“Practically perfect in every way?” Sirius bats his eyelashes at Frank.

“Supremely good company?” James adds.

“Fucking intolerable—sit down or no one’s getting fed!”

Sirius rolls his eyes. “Jeez Frank, all you had to do was ask.”

“Yeah,” James agrees, the two of them sharing a smirk as they sit down at the table. “No need to shout.”

It feels good. Smiling. Teasing. It’s the most human James has felt in ages.

“Here, not that you deserve it,” Frank grumbles as he brings over their plates, sitting at the head of the table like the dad he is. Something snags in James’s chest at that thought, it’s a thoroughly uncomfortable feeling. Because Frank really is going to be a dad soon.

And so is he.

That kid is going to be...so...loved.

I hope so. I want to be a good dad.

You will be.

“Hey,” the voice is soft and accompanied by the feeling of someone nudging his foot under the table.

James blinks, realizing that both Frank and Sirius are watching him. That Frank is the one who spoke but Sirius is the one pressing their feet together.

“You okay?” Frank asks.

James swallows, smiling tightly. “Yeah. Fine.”

They eat in silence mostly, with Frank and Sirius occasionally trading small talk back and forth, James piping in here and there. Sirius never takes his foot away. They get through the whole meal before he finally asks:

“Where’s Lily at anyway? Her and Alice hanging out or what?”

James goes tense, watching Frank’s eyes bounce from him to Sirius and back again, clearly confused.

“Have you two not...been talking recently?” he asks eventually, which has Sirius sitting up, James can practically see his ears twitch, he might as well be Padfoot.

“I was at my cousins,” he’s looking at James. “What happened?”

What happened.

James doesn’t think he has it in him to explain. Luckily, it’s Sirius, so he doesn’t need to. All he has to do is look at him. It’s only a second before the other boy’s eyes grow wide.

“Oh. Shit.”

Frank watches them intently but doesn’t comment.

“She?”

“Yeah.”

“And then she?”

James nods. “She’s been staying at Mary’s the last few days.” At least he thinks it’s been a few days, his grasp on time isn’t the strongest at the moment.

Sirius sits back in his chair, letting out a low whistle. “Shit,” he says again.

“Shit.” James agrees. He scrapes his fork across his empty plate, silence falling over them.

“Not that that wasn’t a fascinating bit of Legilimency to witness but,” Frank leans forward, ducking his head, trying to catch James’s eye. “Someone want to fill me in?” His tone is filled with concern. Of course it is, he was here for James’s meltdown. He grits his teeth, embarrassment returning.

He doesn’t know how to explain.

Doesn’t even know where to start.

You’re my person.

What?

You wanted to know what you are to me. You’re my person. You’re mine.

Okay Reg. Yeah, I'm yours. You're mine too.

"Regulus is dead," James winces when Sirius finally says it, grateful to him. He knows that it hurts him too. Maybe differently. But pain is pain.

Frank blinks, clearly surprised by this sudden new information. "Regulus? Your brother Regulus?"

"That'd be the one," Sirius's voice is carefully blank. James has heard that tone before. It's never good.

Frank lets out a breath. "Wow, jeez, okay I—how?"

Sirius shakes his head. "Don't know. He was running away, that's what Andromeda thinks, Voldemort caught him. Or someone else did and brought him to Voldemort. Either way... well, you can imagine how that went."

James squeezes his eyes shut.

No.

He won't.

He refuses.

"I saw him you know."

That's enough to make James looks up. "You saw him?"

"At the Ministry," Frank explains. "During the attack. I saw him, he looked..." Frank's eyes go a little distant. "I mean, listen, I never liked the kid much, no offence Sirius—"

"None taken."

"He was a damn good Seeker but other than that he was a bit of a prick. But..." Frank shakes his head, "the look on his face that day? When he saw me? I don't know...it was...painful. Broke my heart."

James bites down on the inside of his cheek trying to keep himself from doing something stupid. Saying something stupid. Fucking crying again.

"I don't understand though," Frank goes on after a brief pause, and James does his best not to cringe when he feels Frank's gaze fall on him. "What does that have to do with you and Lily?"

"Um," he starts, the sound shaking in his mouth. "Well, I—"

You're my person.

Okay Reg. Yeah, I'm yours. You're mine too.

“I—“

Then why? Why do you want me to come with you?

Because I love you too.

James’s fingers have started anxiously tapping on the tabletop. “I was...I was with him.”

Inadequate.

How fucking inadequate.

“With him?” Frank repeats, looking briefly at Sirius and then back to James. “When? When he died?”

No.

No.

He did that alone.

I left him alone.

James manages to shake his head. “I was with him—I—we were together.”

There’s a beat of silence.

“Together?”

James can’t read Frank’s tone. Can’t look at his face.

“Yeah.”

There’s another pause.

“When?” Frank asks again, but there’s a different sound to his voice now. A different weight to the question. And James finally forces himself to look up, to hold the other boy’s gaze.

“At school,” Sirius answers for him, clearly thinking he’s helping. Saving James again. But Frank doesn’t look away and neither does James. “Right? James?”

He doesn’t want to answer.

Doesn’t have it in him for another fight.

“The day of the attack,” he finally manages, voice quiet.

To his credit, Frank doesn’t flinch.

“What?” Sirius demands. “What the fuck are you talking about?”

James swallows, his throat tight, turning to Sirius who is far less calm.

“I’m sorry.”

“You’re sorry?” And then, as though the information is only just sinking in. What James really means. What he’s saying. Anger flashes clearly in Sirius’s eyes. “Wait, let me get this straight—you were with him? *With* him with him? The day of the attack at the Ministry?”

“Yes.”

Sirius’s expression is thunderous. A storm on the horizon. James feels the weight of it in his chest.

“What about Lily?”

James just stares helplessly back at him. Naked. Without excuses.

“It’s been fucking weeks.”

“I know.”

“You didn’t say anything.”

“I know.”

Sirius shakes his head, a cold laugh falling from his mouth. “Jesus fucking Christ, you know, you and Moony have really got this lying thing down pat—”

“Sirius—”

“I never figured myself for naive. Thought my mum fucked me up a bit too much for that, but you lot? You lot are really proving me wrong.”

“Sirius—”

But Sirius is on his feet, slamming his chair back so hard it falls over, storming out of the room. James braces himself for the sound of the door slamming again. For the hollow aching feeling of being left. But all he hears is Sirius’s footsteps on the stairs. James wonders if he’s going to his old room.

For a moment neither James nor Frank seem able to move. To speak. Until finally Frank sighs.

“Well...I didn’t see that coming.”

James smiles shakily down at the table. “Surprise.”

Frank huffs out a laugh. “So, at school?”

James does his best to work around the lump in his throat. “Yeah.”

“For how long?”

“Bit more than a year.”

Frank makes a noise of affirmation that James can’t quite decipher. “That’s a long time in school,” he says eventually.

It had felt like it. Like all the rest of his seven years could fit into hours, but the time he’d been with Regulus took up years. Decades. Lifetimes.

“Yeah,” is all he says, the word barely a whisper.

Frank reaches out, hand wrapping around James’s wrist and squeezing. “I still don’t think you’re the villain James.”

Something that was supposed to be a scoff but ends up being more choked comes out of James’s mouth. “You’re the only one.”

“They’re hurt. It’s not the same thing,” James doesn’t bother replying. Something Frank lets him get away with for about thirty more seconds before he starts talking again. “I told you, I saw him that day. If it was heartbreaking for me I can’t imagine what it was like for you.”

James’s chest gives an unpleasant twist, and he exhales, slow, measured. Like he’s just been hit by a Bludger and he’s trying to stay on his broom.

“I could count his ribs,” he says, voice small. “Being there was killing him. I mean really—really killing him. I’ve never seen someone...waste away like that.” His voice trembles and Frank tightens his grip. “I just wanted to get him out. I just wanted to keep him safe.”

“James,” there he goes, saying his name like that again. “His death wasn’t your fault, you know that right?” But James shakes his head.

“I asked him to leave. I asked him to leave and they killed him.”

“Listen to what you just said,” Frank pushes on fiercely. “He was dead if he stayed anyway. At least leaving gave him a chance.”

This doesn’t feel like a chance.

This doesn’t feel like anything.

James pulls away, wiping at his face even though there aren’t any tears. “I should go check on Sirius,” he says eventually, forcing his voice to behave normally. “Make sure he isn’t setting the house on fire or something.”

Frank hesitates for a moment before nodding his head. “I’ll clean up down here. Shout if you need backup, yeah?”

James shoots him a shaky smile. “Yeah. Okay.”

He isn't exactly sure what he's expecting to find. Certainly some sort of destruction. Some evidence of violence. What he isn't expecting, is for Sirius to be lying calmly on his back in his old bed, staring at the ceiling. It's so unexpected James actually questions whether or not he's in the right room. None of the lights are on, the only brightness coming from the sliver allowed in by the door.

"I'm so tired of secrets," Sirius says finally, breaking the silence. "I thought we were done with that. I thought at least you and I were done with that."

James stands in the doorway for a second longer before walking forward and lying down on the bed next to him. The way they used to when they were kids. Curtains pulled around their fourposter beds, whispering for hours. They're a bit bigger now mind you, but James still manages to fit, and Sirius doesn't instantly try to push him off so he takes that as a good sign.

"I'm sorry," James says finally.

There's a long moment before Sirius talks again. "Sometimes I feel like I don't even recognize us anymore," his voice is small, curling up and lying in the space between them.

James squeezes his eyes shut. "I'm sorry."

He can feel Sirius shake his head but he doesn't say anything. At least not at first. "You want to hear something really stupid?" he asks eventually.

James turns his head to look at him. "What?"

He can only see Sirius's profile, highlighted by the light spilling in from the corridor. "I really thought we were going to be happy," a joyless smile tugs at his lips.

James thinks he can hear the cracks forming in his chest.

"Yeah," he says softly. "Yeah me too."

There isn't much to say after that.

James isn't sure how long they lie there before Frank comes up, stopping abruptly inside the door.

"Are you napping or are you dead?" he asks.

"Neither," Sirius answers.

Frank wobbles his head from side to side. “Fair enough. I take it I’m not going to need to separate you two then? We’ve worked through our issues?”

James snorts, because the idea that anything that is happening right now can be worked through seems funny to him.

“I think we’ll manage not to scratch each other’s eyes out, don’t you Prongs?”

“I should hope so, your eyes are your best feature.”

They’re attempting normalcy. Brevity. They don’t quite manage it. Both of their voices too scratchy and too tired to make any of it believable.

“Uh-huh,” Frank says from the doorway. “Well, I’ll leave you to it shall I?”

“Excuse me?” Sirius calls out. “Where do you think you’re going?”

Frank turns back to them and even in the dark James can see the confusion on his face. “Er—to find the guest room.” Technically they’re currently in the guest room but James doesn’t bother pointing that out.

“Get in the bed Frank,” he says instead.

Frank laughs. “Yeah, no, I don’t think so.”

Sirius looks at James. “He thinks we’re joking.”

“He must not know what jokes are then.”

Sirius nods in agreement, turning back to Frank. “Get in the bed Frank. This is not a joke.”

Frank’s eyes move from one boy to the other, something between bemusement and shock on his face. “Don’t be ridiculous. There’s not even any room!”

Rolling his eyes, Sirius sits up, sliding his wand out of his sleeve and casting an extension charm on the bed that causes it to accordion out into the room. The pair of them then look at Frank expectantly but the older boy only shakes his head.

“I’m not—“

“Frank,” Sirius cuts him off, sounding very serious, “we’re sad.”

Frank looks back at them, trying to hold out, but clearly defeated. Eventually he sighs. “This really is ridiculous you know,” he mutters, noxing the light in the corridor and reluctantly climbing into bed with them.

When they were kids and they would lie like this, curtains drawn, talking, it was inevitable that Remus would eventually find his way next to Sirius, that Peter would come, sleepy-eyed and wrapped in a blanket, the four of them falling asleep on top of one another. A many limbed, many headed, monster.

This isn't like that exactly. The cruelty of the past, is nothing is ever as it was. But it helps. As James closes his eyes listening to the soft breathing of his two friends, pressing against him on either side, limbs sleep warm and reassuring, James feels his grief loosen. Still ever present. Just a bit less choking.

At some point in the night James wakes up. He lies there for a minute, blinking the sleep away, unclear if there's a reason for his sudden consciousness or if it's just because Sirius has started snoring. He smiles a little at that. He's missed the sound. Which is not something he ever thought he would say.

He stays still for a little longer before he feels something start to tug—on his thoughts, his stomach, the heart in his chest. He slips quietly out of bed, a bit difficult since during the course of the night Sirius has seen fit to throw his arm over James, burying his face in his shoulder. By some miracle, however, James manages to escape. Avoiding the creaky floorboards he's had memorized since he was a kid, following the tug down the stairs and into the front hall. Following it all the way to his jacket pocket.

He lights one of the lamps in the sitting room with his wand, dropping onto the sofa, the letter held delicately in his hands. For a long time all he can do is stare at it, thumb tracing along the elegant J on the front. He knows this was written days ago. Weeks even. But it'll still be the last thing that Regulus ever says to him. And he's not sure he's ready to face that.

Eventually, fingers shaking, he slides his hand under the wax seal and pulls the pieces of parchment out of the envelope. They glow in the low light.

Dear J,

It starts...

I've been thinking about dinner. About which one of us would do the chopping and which one would do the stirring. Which one would set everything on fire. I've been thinking about laundry too. Who would put it off the longest (you) who would have a whole system in place for it (me) who would do the folding (you like mind numbing tasks don't you?). See what you've done to me? I've been reduced to fantasizing about household chores.

You described to me once, the life you wanted us to have, that you pictured for us. I didn't believe in it then. But I believe in it now. I think about it all the time James. You were right when you said I gave up last time, but I promise I won't do it again. Not now. We've wasted so much time. I've wasted so much time.

I know it must seem like I'm still wasting time, but once I've done what I need to, once I've done it you'll understand. I know it won't make up for all the bad, but it's a start right? I wanna try this time, I really want to try. Sirius did it after all. It can't be impossible.

I love you James. Pathetically and desperately and always. Even when we didn't speak. Even when I hated you I still loved you. Wherever you want me. However you'll have me. I just want to be near you that's all. I'm so tired of you being so far away.

Sorry, it's getting late and I'm feeling overly sentimental. Mostly I just want you to know that I'll see you soon. That I'll make things right. I promise.

Yours, always.

R.

PART IV CERCI

It was Barty Crouch of all people, who told Cerci about Regulus.

He sent her an owl. Brief. To the point.

Greengrass,

Figured you should know.

Regulus is dead.

He tried to get out.

There's no body.

Cheers,

B. C

And of course she hadn't believed him. Not for a second. Apparating to Grimmauld Place immediately only to be met by a wall of impenetrable wards. It wasn't like it had been last time—after the attack on the Ministry—these wards didn't feel like Regulus at all. Didn't feel like his magic.

Because.

Of course.

They weren't.

Even now, thinking about that moment, that realization, feels like breaking her ribs. Cerci's life is a much lonelier place without Regulus Black. Once she'd calmed down, she'd written Barty back. "Tried to get out, no body" was not nearly enough information for her. But he never responded.

She had fully intended to track him down and demand answers. Answers no one, so far, had been able, or willing, to give her. Not Regulus's father, who wept when she told him how much Regulus had wanted to visit, how much he had loved him. Or his mother, who recoiled at the mention of her son's name. Embarrassed by his death. By his life. She was certain they had to know more than they were saying, but she was also certain, that she was far more likely to crack Barty Crouch than Walburga Black.

She'd been coming up with a whole plan. Perhaps one involving a little kidnapping and intimidation. But then. Then James Potter had appeared. The last person she ever expected to find outside the Black family crypt. The last person she had ever expected of being Regulus's...well...anything. And the shock of it, had jogged loose another memory of James Potter.

Or at least a story.

Of him beating the living daylights out of Lucius Malfoy in the Atrium of the Ministry of Magic.

And suddenly, there was someone else she wanted answers from.

Which is how Cerci Greengrass finds herself outside the gates of Malfoy Manor for the first time since she was nine years old and her parents dragged her along to some sort of Christmas ball. Cerci has a vague memory of eating some bad chicken and vomiting on the Floo ride home. Plus, she'd been forced to wear a terribly uncomfortable dress—too many bows—even just thinking about it makes her nose wrinkle. All in all, not an enjoyable experience.

Still. Here she is.

"And you are?" a magical voice demands out of nowhere.

"Cerci Greengrass."

There's a moment's pause and then. "There's nothing in Mr. Malfoy's itinerary about a social call from a Cerci Greengrass."

No. There wouldn't be.

"Tell him I'm here to talk about Regulus Black."

She had been there, for the week or so after the Ministry attack, when Lucius had relentlessly pushed against Regulus's wards. Every day. Without fail. Sometimes multiple times a day. She hadn't quite understood it then. Still doesn't quite understand it now. But she reckons that that kind of obsession doesn't just disappear. In fact, she suspects Lucius Malfoy is dying to talk about Regulus.

There's a longer pause this time before the voice returns. "Access has been granted. Please follow the walkway to the main house. You will find Mr. Malfoy in the first floor sitting room, third door on the left."

The grand gates in front of her creak open, revealing an unnecessarily long driveway carved between two lawns which remain green even now at the end of December.

When she makes it to the main house her steps echo through the entryway. She isn't sure what she was expecting—in her memories the mansion is filled with people and music and light. Of course, that had been a ball, but it all feels rather different when it's empty. The grey winter sun filtering in through the windows, the grand corridors and high ceilings making everything feel cold and hollow. Cerci shivers at the thought of having to live in a place like this.

"Third door on the left," she murmurs to herself as she starts walking.

She isn't sure if she's meant to knock. After a few seconds of standing outside the room she decides "polite knocking" is not quite the energy she's going for and decides to just push on through.

Lucius Malfoy is sitting in a high-backed chair upholstered in green velvet, looking every inch the villain she's sure he thinks he is. He's reading something, long black pipe in his free hand. He doesn't look up when she comes in.

"Close the door," he says, sounding bored.

Cerci's wand twitches as she lets the door slam behind her. It has the desired effect, Lucius's eyes snapping up at the noise, Cerci not bothering to hide her smug smile as she slips her wand back up her sleeve. No reason to put him on high alert just yet.

"Miss Greengrass," he says, snapping his book closed and leaning back in his seat. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"I want to talk about Regulus."

She doesn't miss the flash in his eyes. "Yes. So you mentioned. Though I'm not sure why you would wish to do so with me?"

She arches her brow. “Aren’t you?”

Cerci doesn’t buy any of it. Not the forced casual tone, not the book, not the pipe, not the confused look on Lucius’s face which is quickly disappearing. It all feels like an act to her. A piece of theatre.

She takes the chair across from him without being asked, eyes meeting his. She doesn’t speak—contrary to popular belief it is actually possible for her to be quiet. And silence is particularly good at getting people to start saying things they shouldn’t, just to fill the void, all of us so desperately uncomfortable with the emptiness.

Regulus taught her that.

A few minutes pass before Lucius’s eyes narrow. “What did he tell you then?”

“Was there something to tell?” Cerci asks mildly, smiling politely at him. “I thought you had no idea why I would want to talk to you?”

Now Lucius’s face forms a full blown scowl. He isn’t old, but when he makes this expression, you can see how he will be one day.

“I’m not interested in playing games little girl.”

But Cerci’s smile does not diminish. “Sure you are, or you wouldn’t have opened the gate.”

Lucius appears to have no response to this so he simply scowls harder.

“Why were you trying to break through Regulus’s wards?” her voice is calm, level—even pleasant. But if you were observant enough, something Lucius certainly is not, you would be able to see the knives in the corners of her mouth. In the centre of her iris’s. The violence in the set of her shoulders.

Lucius lets out a breath of laughter. “I’m not sure what you’re expecting but it’s nothing spectacular; I wanted to see him, that’s all. ”

“Clearly he didn’t want to see you.”

“Yes well,” Lucius’s posh accent somehow manages to grow even more condescending as he flicks a bit of lint off his trousers. “Regulus was not a very good judge of what was good for him.”

Cerci agrees. Though she doubts very much that Lucius and her are thinking of the same things.

“And you were good for him?” she asks, same calm tone.

“Of course,” as though suggesting anything else would be absurd. “I’ve been his closest ally since his brother left him.”

No, Cerci thinks, that isn't true. Regulus always kept his allies close, even in school. Even if he didn't particularly like them as people. Which means that whatever Regulus saw Lucius as, it wasn't that.

"You two didn't seem particularly close," she says finally.

A twisted smirk curls the corner of Lucius's mouth. "Oh, I assure you. We were very close."

Something about the way he says it makes her skin itch. She isn't exactly sure what he's implying but she knows she doesn't like it.

"I've got another question for you."

Lucius snorts. "Go on then."

She gives him a long look. "Why did James Potter attack you?"

There's the smallest flicker, a twitch of his lip, and when his words come out next he's practically snarling. "Because he's unhinged I imagine. I've never experienced anything so uncivilized in my life."

Cerci lets that sit between them for a moment. "So he just went off, unprovoked?"

"Ask anyone who was there," Lucius gestures with his pipe. "I did nothing to him."

"Did you do something to someone else?"

She can feel it. The tensing in his posture. The way he draws himself up a little higher, holds his nose in the air a bit more. Wrapping his superiority around him like a shield.

"You're going to have to be more specific, I have done a great many things to a great many people."

Cerci is still smiling, though it is beginning to feel a bit strained. "I'm sure you have," she inches her wand slowly towards her palm. "But what did you do to Regulus Black?"

There's a pause, Cerci can hear the clock on the fireplace mantle ticking, hear the sound of her own pulse pounding in her ears. Then, the older man sneers.

"Nothing he didn't want."

Cerci never figured out how to put all the pieces of Regulus together, never quite managed to see the full picture all at once. It's one of the many things that breaks her heart—knowing now she never will. That so much of the boy who was her best friend, her family, will remain a mystery to her. But she does have a very clear memory of Regulus standing in the Slytherin common room, struggling to breathe, to put one foot in front of the other, a boy who couldn't be touched.

It would come and go, Regulus's aversion to other people's hands. It was in the moments when he was at his worst, the moments you wanted to touch him the most, that you had to

keep away. She had worked that much out at least.

Looking at Lucius Malfoy now. She thinks she can perhaps work out a bit more.

Cerci doesn't know what her face is doing but it makes Lucius roll his eyes. "Oh don't give me that look," he says dismissively. "Whatever Regulus said, it was just him trying to get your attention. Your sympathy. He was always like that, a bit of a worm if you will. I'm not surprised it got him killed," he laughs cruelly. "What a meaningless little life he ended up living."

Cerci is fairly certain Lucius doesn't see the wand slide fully into her hand. He certainly seems surprised, when a second later he's being thrown from his chair and into the wall behind him, body hitting with a satisfying "thud".

"Bitch," he wheezes, the force of the spell knocking the air from his lungs. He reaches for his wand but Cerci is too quick.

"Expelliarmus," the small piece of wood flicks across the room as she steps towards him.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing? DOBBY! Narcissa!"

"I cast a silencing charm on the room the minute I stepped through the door," Cerci says calmly, pressing the tip of her wand to the older man's neck. "You must have missed it, while you were pretending to read your book."

Lucius bares his teeth, but he isn't able to wipe the fear from his eyes. "This is a very bad idea little girl."

"I disagree."

"What're you going to do? Truly? Kill me?" he sounds like he's verging on hysterical. "You expect me to believe you're capable of that?"

She looks at him thoughtful. "No," she says after a brief pause. "I don't expect you to believe I'm capable of anything." No one ever does. "Crucio."

Lucius screams. She doesn't let it go on for too long. Just long enough. His skin shiny with sweat as he collapses back against the wall, shivering.

"Cunt."

Cerci ignores him, lifting her wand again and watching Lucius desperately try to scramble backwards even though he has nowhere to go.

"What the fuck do you want from me?" his voice is almost painfully high.

I want you to take it back,

she thinks hopelessly.

I want you take it all back.

All the pain you caused him.

I want you to take his place.

“What happened to him, really? How did he die?” she asks.

Lucius shakes his head, the hair that’s slipped out of his plait whipping around his face. “I don’t know, honest to Merlin.”

Lie.

Cerci steps forward.

“Look, he went missing for a few days—“

“Yes I was there for that bit.”

“No one knew where he was, no one, not even the Dark Lord.”

“And then?” she prompts.

Lucius swallows—it’s a showy swallow, his Adam’s apple on full display, bobbing up and down in his abnormally long, skinny neck. “And then one day the Dark Lord went somewhere on his own. And when he returned he said that Regulus was dead, that he’d been trying to defect and that there was no body.”

Cerci considers this for a moment. “No one else ever saw him, Regulus? Just Voldemort?”

Lucius cringes at the use of the name. “Yes,” he answers.

It was the Horcrux.

It had to be.

Regulus found out where it was and went after it.

But why didn’t he bring me? asks the small voice in the back of her mind.

She notices Lucius attempting to inch towards his wand. She doesn’t hesitate. “Afflicto,” wand pointed at his arm. There’s an instant crack as the bone snaps and the older man begins to howl, clutching the broken limb to his chest. She watches him writhe around for a few more seconds before stepping forward again, wand back at his neck, knocking his chin so that he’s forced to look at her.

“I want you to listen to me,” she says, gaze steady on his darting eyes. “I want you to hear this. To know it in your bones,” he whimpers, holding his arm closer. “You could live for a hundred years. A thousand. But you will never matter the way that he mattered.”

Finding no escape his eyes reluctantly meet her’s. She makes sure her stare is relentless.

And then she pulls away.

Walking around the overturned chair, through the door, down the hall.

She makes it all the way to the front gate before the tears start.

Cerci writes Albus Dumbledore a letter.

She considers going to see him in person but she can't bring herself to. Too afraid maybe. Too tired more likely. Of all these men and their war.

So Cerci Greengrass writes Albus Dumbledore a letter.

She explains it all. The Horcrux, Tom Riddle, Salazar Slytherin, how she thinks Regulus's death is connected. She includes their notes. Their research. And at the end, right at the end of all that, she asks that if it turns out to be true, he tells people. Tells people it was Regulus who saw it first. Who tried first.

And then she sends it away.

She doesn't expect him to listen.

But for Regulus's sake she has to try.

Actually, she has a small list of things she has to try for Regulus.

"Cerci!"

She looks up as Moira walks through the Leaky Cauldron towards her. Cerci's sat at a table by herself currently taking out her anxiety on the napkins.

"Hey," Cerci smiles, wiping the dozens of shredded pieces of paper quickly onto the floor. She'll vanish them later.

"It's so good to see you," Moira has about the loveliest smile Cerci has ever seen. It's just so... warm. It makes her feel safe. "You didn't bring your entourage today."

Cerci blinks. "My—what?"

Moira motions at the empty booth around her. "The boys who were with you last time?"

"Oh," Cerci does her best not to wince. Not to look at the spot that Regulus had sat in. Instead she swallows, opening her mouth to say what she came here to say when—

“So what’ll it be?” Moira asks, the QuickQuotes Quill standing at attention beside her. “The usual? Burger and chips?”

“Er—“ *crap*. “Y-yeah, yes, great.” This is not going well. Why did she think this would go well? She doesn’t know how to ask somebody out!

“No whisky this time?” Moira teases, and Cerci thinks her smile must be strained.

“Just pumpkin juice is good thanks.”

“You got it,” Moira gives Cerci a wink. “Anything else I can get you?”

And the thing is, she doesn’t have to. Ask Moira out that is. No one knows she’s here. No one even knows she has feelings for someone anymore. Reg was the only person she ever told. She could just walk away. No harm no foul.

Except.

Except she can’t help thinking about Regulus, who could only ever speak about the boy he loved in bits and pieces. When he was upset. When he had an escape. When he was drunk. Or James Potter, who didn’t even know that Regulus had managed that much. Who didn’t think that anyone in Regulus’s life had any idea about them. And how much it had clearly meant to him, to find out the opposite was true.

So many things were left unsaid between them. So many things that Regulus must have thought he would have time to say one day.

“Cerci?”

She blinks, coming back to the present, Moira’s head cocked to the side, a slightly confused look on her face.

Cerci shakes herself awake. “Sorry I—sorry I was just,” she takes a deep breath. “I was actually just wondering if maybe you might be interested in going out sometime?” she says in one big rush, barely leaving any space between her words.

There’s a pause.

“Just in general?” slightly amused. “Or was there someone specific you were thinking I could go out with?”

“Oh,” Cerci laughs nervously, running her hand through her hair, feeling her cheeks heat. “Right, yeah, forgot that bit.”

“It’s an important bit,” and Cerci thinks—maybe—just maybe—there’s a little blush colouring Moira’s cheeks too.

“Well, um, I was wondering if you’d want to go on a date with...me?”

And there comes that smile, the one that makes Cerci feel safe. Comforted.

“I would love to,” Moira says. “I’m off work Saturday.”

Cerci nearly chokes. “I—you—really?”

“Am I really off on Saturday? Yes.”

“No I—okay, okay great. Yes. Cool. Saturday then. It’s—ah—it’s a date.”

Moira is still smiling. “It’s a date.” There’s a small moment of stillness during which the two of them just smile at one another like idiots. “Well,” Moira says eventually, “I guess I should go get your burger then.”

“Oh,” Cerci had completely forgotten she ordered anything. “Right.”

She watches Moira walk towards the kitchen feeling her heart stutter in her chest, hands all clammy and something—maybe butterflies—humming in her belly.

“Did you see that Reg?” she whispers, unable to keep the smile out of her voice. “I did it.”

Chapter End Notes

Hey! Hi! Hello!

I know it's been a few weeks but here we are, back again!

I hope that at least parts of this felt comforting (and also that it wasn't too long and boring)

I feel like I had more to say but my brain is fried right now so thank you all for your support! The next chapter will be posted along with the epilogue and then this baby is done! Which is wild and crazy and a little sad!

ANYWAY hope you're having a good day / night / morning :)

Chapter 55

Chapter Summary

People make mistakes, but they also make choices.

Chapter Notes

cw / tw: Mild sexual content

tw: Discussions of SA (not graphic)

tw: Major Character Deaths (multiple)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

PART I REGULUS

You were...the best part for me. Of being here. Of...being.

September 1972

Regulus watches as the train station flies by outside the window. People and buildings blurring together as they pull away from all the things he knows. He can't even see Kreacher anymore. Won't see him again until Christmas.

"C'mon," Sirius nudges him lightly with his elbow. "I'll introduce you to the boys, you'll love 'em."

Regulus looks up at Sirius and doesn't think he's imagining the strain in his smile. Things have been...weird, since he came back from school this summer. Every time they talk it's like there's something they're trying not to say, only Regulus isn't sure what it is. Just knows he's being careful. Tiptoeing around their conversations.

It doesn't help that Sirius has been fighting with their mum more. It's Sirius's fault for shoving the fact that he's a Gryffindor in her face. For bringing up James bloody Potter every

five seconds. Even just thinking the name makes Regulus roll his eyes. When Sirius wasn't up in his room writing him letters, he was in Regulus's room talking about him. It got so annoying that one day Regulus just snapped:

"If you love him so much why don't you just go bloody marry him."

Sirius had blinked. "Jeez Reg, excuse me for having friends."

Regulus doesn't know why they can't seem to get along anymore. Why hearing about Hogwarts has stopped being fun and started being aggravating. He just wants things to go back to normal. Wants Sirius to stop picking fights with their parents and looking so disappointed when Regulus doesn't want to pick them with him.

"Pretty sure they're down here somewhere," Sirius mutters as they make their way along the train car, squishing against the wall to allow other students to pass them. Regulus wants desperately to ask Sirius if they can just sit on their own, but he already knows the answer will be "no" and he doesn't want to have to endure the pain of hearing it.

"Ah, yup, that sounds like James's laugh."

Regulus's stomach lurches. "Sirius—"

But Sirius is already sliding open the door, letting loose a flurry of young voices.

"Lads," Sirius throws out his arms. "I've arrived."

"About bloody time!"

A boy with wild brown hair gets out of his seat, instantly pulling Sirius into a hug. He's wearing a pair of glasses, slightly lopsided on his nose, and his eyes remind Regulus of the colour of the creek near their home in Scotland.

There are two other boys in the compartment, both lighter haired, one with a ghastly scar running across his face. He's the first one to make eye contact with Regulus, who is still standing a few feet behind his brother in the open doorway. The scarred boy smiles. Regulus does not smile back.

After a few minutes of Sirius and the bespectacled boy joshing one another back and forth—laughing and babbling and pushing and shoving—Sirius finally seems to remember Regulus is there.

"This is Reg by the way," he smiles when he says it, which Regulus thinks is maybe a good sign, slinging his arm around Reg's shoulders and squeezing. "Reg, these are the boys—Remus," he nods towards the scarred one who offers Regulus a wave, but Regulus isn't sure if it would be odd for him to return it or not so he just keeps his hands in his pockets. "And that there's Peter."

"Hi," Peter says without looking up from the chocolate frog cards in his lap.

"And James."

James.

Regulus has heard that name so much at this point he feels as though it's burned into his brain. Every time it's said he gets a bitter taste in his mouth. But now, as he turns to the boy in front of him, their eyes meet for the first time.

And Regulus's heart hiccups in his chest.

Everything going quiet.

He's sure it's dislike that's making all the softest parts of him flutter.

Sure it's bitterness fizzling in his stomach.

Sure it's annoyance that makes his hand shake when he extends it to the older boy for no reason he can think of.

"Hello," he says to James Potter, who looks down at him with a bemused smile.

"Hi," he half-laughs as he shakes Regulus's hand. Regulus doesn't understand what's funny, but it's not...unusual, for him to get things wrong in moments like this. He's never had Sirius's talent for charming people.

James's handshake is solid without being overbearing. His palm warm when it presses against Regulus's. And his heart does it again.

Hiccup.

Hiccup.

Hiccup.

"Relax Reg, it's not a dinner party, no need to be so formal," Sirius is saying as James Potter pulls away and they all squish into their seats.

The scarred boy is next to Regulus, his face in a book, the other blond one organizing his cards into meticulous piles. Sirius and James immediately fall into easy conversation. Talking too quickly and using too many inside jokes for Regulus to follow.

James Potter doesn't look at him again.

And Regulus hates him.

Hates him.

Hates him.

He flexes the hand he shook. Like he can still feel James's touch.

Hates him.

Hates him.

Hates him.

September 1975

It's embarrassing enough that Regulus has ended up in this situation—pinned to a wall by Nicolai fucking Mulciber, a boy who couldn't think his way out of a paper bag. But it's made even more mortifying when James Potter walks around the corner. Regulus doesn't know what he's done to piss the universe off, but he wishes it would cut him some slack every once and a while.

Not that Potter even looks at him of course—he never does really. The most irritating thing about that, is that Regulus is pretty sure it isn't on purpose. Regulus simply doesn't register for James Potter. At least not until he does something Potter deems worthy of moral condemnation. He is not sparing with his righteousness.

“Got a hot date with the Giant Squid Snivellus?”

Potter has barely spoken before Mulciber jolts back, letting go of Regulus as he falls to the ground, enchanted ropes wrapping around his arms and legs. Potter looks insufferably smug about it, but then, he rarely looks anything else.

“Fucking Potter—“

“Expelliarmus!”

Regulus watches the ensuing chaos with mild interest. Irritated with himself for being impressed by Potter's ability to take on three opponents at once. Thinking anything positive about Potter always feels like the deepest betrayal of himself. But then, he's never been a particularly loyal person.

“I just hope I'm there to see it.”

“See what?”

“See them break you.”

Regulus flinches at that, not that anyone is paying him enough attention to notice. He knows a thing or two about being broken. He watches the confusion play across James Potter's frustratingly handsome face and feels the tickle of another traitorous thought—that he hopes Snape is wrong. He might find James Potter's moral indignation tiresome, but he can't quite imagine the messy haired boy without it. A broken James Potter simply feels unnatural.

“You want this?” Potter holds up Avery’s wand, twirling it between his fingers.

“You know I do, you twat.”

Potter nods. “Well alright then,” he winds his arm back and chucks the wand down to the other end of the corridor.

“Bastard!”

“Go on doggy, go fetch.”

Growling, Avery takes off after his wand.

“Hey!” Mulciber shouts. “Hey wait—fucking—Merlin’s tits, wait!”

That’s when Jame Potter’s face cracks open, joy lighting up his eyes as he starts to laugh. Regulus drops his gaze. Something about Potter is too bright. Regulus doesn’t know how to bear it. Far more comfortable in the shadows.

But then—

“Regulus?”

It’s an automatic response, looking up, his grey eyes colliding with vivid colour.

James Potter is looking at him.

October 1975

He’s drunk.

Which is stupid of him.

People do things, and say things, they shouldn’t when they’re drunk. And the list of things that Regulus ought not to do or say is longer than most people’s. He told himself he wasn’t going to come up to the Astronomy Tower tonight. Told himself to just stay at the fucking party. Told himself that James wouldn’t even be there—because why would he be?

And yet.

And yet.

Somehow Regulus finds himself climbing the winding steps, pushing open the heavy wooden door, standing a few feet from a beaming James Potter, who looks so beautiful it makes Regulus’s chest ache.

To be fair, being around James always makes Regulus ache.

He wants nothing more than to touch him. Not even in a sexual way. He just wants to know if he's as warm and sturdy as he looks. As soft. He just wants to run his fingers through James's hair, down his cheek, along the hills and valleys of each one of his fingers. He wants to worship him.

That probably isn't normal.

The things Regulus wants rarely are.

"You gonna sit down or...?"

Regulus blinks, James's voice bringing his drunken thoughts back to the present. "Right," he nods to himself. "Right. Yeah."

It's hard to concentrate, this close to James, even when he isn't drunk. His eyes forever dipping down to James's mouth, like it has some sort of magnetic pull. Merlin this was such a bad idea. His whole body is buzzing from the adrenaline of the game. The adrenaline of having James Potter's undivided attention. He feels out of control.

"You were brilliant today," James says, Regulus is practically in his lap, close enough that he can see the small flecks of gold in James's eyes.

Stunning.

Every inch of him.

"Yeah?" is all he can say, hoping James doesn't notice how breathless he sounds.

"That faint? It was beautiful Reg, I mean it. I—God, watching you I just—how did I never notice before? How did I never notice what a fucking star you are?"

Regulus snorts. "Literally."

"Yeah," James says without the sarcasm. "Yeah, but you are though."

He doesn't deserve this. He knows he doesn't. The adoration in James's voice, the kindness in his eyes, it isn't fair for Regulus to do this. Let James get caught up in the boy Regulus could be, instead of the one he is. Twisted and gnarled and rotten. Bound to let you down. To walk away when you need him most.

But he's too selfish and too drunk to do the right thing. James's eyes boring holes in his chest.

"Guess you weren't looking," Regulus says eventually.

James pauses, and Regulus wonders if that was a stupid thing to say until; "Maybe. But I'm looking now."

He knows better.

Better than to let his eyes flicker down to James's lips again.

Better than to let himself lean forward.

Fourteen years old and Regulus has never kissed a boy.

He's been kissed.

But that isn't quite the same thing.

Their lips meet and everything inside of him sighs with relief.

Oh yes, oh please, right here. This is where I'm meant to be. Where I should have been all along. Between his lips. Under his teeth. Oh, please, oh please, oh please.

He's drunk.

So it takes him too long to notice that James isn't moving.

When he pulls back he swears he sees horror in James's eyes and all the good feelings that had fluttered their way to the surface crack open and fall apart. Suddenly he feels dead sober. Scrambling to his feet, his whole body shaking. He's gone and fucked it up, of course. He couldn't just be happy with what he had—with their conversations, their budding friendship. He had to take more.

"I'm sorry. Fuck, fuck, I'm sorry I didn't—I didn't mean it." He's backing up towards the door, hands held in front of him. Waiting for the anger. For the violence. "I swear I didn't—" he chokes, he can feel the tears welling up in his eyes.

He won't cry in front of James Potter, he won't. Without another word he turns around and runs.

November 1975

"Merlin's balls—sorry Professor—but James Potter has just stolen the Quaffle!"

James is on another level today. He always plays well but this game—this game is exceptional. It's doing terrible things to Regulus's heart.

"I fucking hate Potter," Barty mutters beside him.

"You just hate that he isn't in Slytherin," Evan is on Regulus's other side, leaning forward over the railing. He's spent more time ogling the sixth year girls below them than he has

watching the game.

“He’s a showoff,” Barty glares at the sky as James speeds across the pitch, pilfered Quaffle in hand. It’s not that Barty’s wrong, James is a horrendous show off. But he still manages moves that Regulus has barely seen attempted by professionals.

“You sound bitter Barty dear,” Evan sings. And then, elbowing Regulus; “You reckon we could bribe Potter to switch houses? You and him on the same team?” he lets out a low whistle. “We’d be fucking unstoppable.”

Regulus does his best to ignore the things that idea does to his stomach. Too close to the fantasies he barely lets himself acknowledge. “Potter? James Potter? Leave Gryffindor?” is what he says. “Not in this lifetime. Besides, he’s already rich, I’m not sure money would be much incentive for him.”

“Ugh, fine, guess you’ll just have to win it all on your own then.”

Regulus smirks.

He fully intends to.

“Another goal for Gryffindor!”

The stands go wild, their cheers echoing throughout the pitch. And James, being the ridiculous person he is, decides to fly over to them and start giving out high-fives, like some sort of beneficent king.

“What the hell is that!” Barty jabs an angry finger in James’s direction. “That can’t be allowed! It’s a fucking penalty—poor sportsmanship!”

Evan and Regulus both stare at him.

“I don’t know if we should bring him to Quidditch matches anymore,” Evan says as they watch Barty’s face turn red with indignation. “I think it’s bad for his health—hey, Barty, breathe okay buddy? It’s gonna be alright.”

“It’s blatant favouritism!”

“I thought you liked favouritism?” Evan asks, and Reg is about to tell him to cut it out, because Barty really does look like he might have a stroke or something, but he’s interrupted:

“Mr. Potter,” McGonagall’s voice comes over the speakers. “Stop showboating and take your position on the field immediately.”

Regulus can’t make out James’s expression at this distance but he swears he can feel him smiling, the joy radiating off of him. Regulus smothers the foolish warmth that tries to pool in his stomach. Whatever this thing with Potter is, he has to keep it contained. To build walls around it. It can’t be bleeding into his everyday life like this.

“Fucking finally,” Barty grumbles under his breath.

The game starts up again, Macdonald getting hold of the Quaffle, racing towards the goalposts. At this rate it won't even matter if Ravenclaw catches the Snitch.

"And Gryffindor is in possession again!" comes the ecstatic voice of the announcer. "Potter and Macdonald are making a joke of Ravenclaw's defences this game. And it looks like—Oh shit."

The Bludger comes out of nowhere.

And even though he knows that it can't be true, Regulus swears he hears it colliding with James's skull. The "crack" echoing in his chest.

"*James*," the name punches out of him involuntarily. Luckily the crowd is loud enough that no one seems to hear.

"Holy shit, this game just got interesting," Evan says, leaning so far over the railing that Regulus's hand shoots out to grab the back of his shirt without even thinking.

"Fucking serves him right," Barty adds from Regulus's other side.

Regulus barely hears them. His whole body running cold as he watches James fall. *Come on*, he thinks, looking around, trying to spot McGonagall. *Do something! Save him!*

There's chaos—in the crowd, in his head, on the Pitch.

Fuck it.

Regulus reaches for his wand—he doesn't care how it'll look, what people will say, he's not about to just let James fall. His hand trembling as it wraps around the handle.

"And that's Gryffindor Beater, Sirius Black, to the rescue," the announcer says as Sirius sweeps James into his arms, barely keeping his own balance. "Quite the heroic gesture, though that hit looked pretty gnarly, Potter does not appear to be conscious."

Regulus exhales as he watches Sirius land on the field, Madam Hooch darting out to meet them. But the pressure in his chest only increases as James is levitated off the Pitch, still unconscious. Every inch of Regulus desperate to go with him.

He'll be okay,

he tells himself.

It's James Potter.

He's always okay.

He's still shaking, still feels like he's going to be sick. Like he won't be able to breathe until he can touch James. Can make sure he's alright.

Merlin when did this happen?

When did he start caring so much about this fucking moron? A crush is one thing, but this? What the hell is this feeling? He doesn't want to think about it too hard, afraid of what he'll find.

He realizes, suddenly, that he's still gripping the handle of his wand and he lets go of it, cheeks flushing with embarrassment even though nobody noticed—and even if they had they wouldn't have known what he was planning to do.

Regulus will never be the one to save James.

To catch him when he falls.

That will always be Sirius.

You'd think Regulus would have learned their roles by now.

In some twisted way he wonders if this whole mess with Potter has been an exercise in self-flagellation. Getting involved with a boy he knows he cannot keep. A boy who will always belong to his brother. Somehow Regulus has managed to find another way to make himself the spare.

“Reg? Reg?” Evan elbows him again and Regulus blinks realizing he's just been staring blankly at the last spot he could see James.

Evan looks at him curiously as the players take their places again.

“You okay?”

“Yeah,” he clears his throat, trying to sound more confident. “Yeah fine.”

The whistle blows.

December 1975

He's been wanting to bring James to the Room for a while, but he's been...afraid. Like somehow this makes whatever they're doing more real. Escalates things. He wants that, and also wants to run away from it all at the same time. He knows he's playing with fire here. He's not sure when to pull away to keep from getting burned. Hopes if it all goes up in flames James makes it out okay.

“Regulus,” there's warning in James's voice.

“The bed is here for a reason Potter,” he crowds James against it until the mattress cuts him off at the knees, causing him to sit down.

“Doesn’t mean we have to do anything,” the look in James’s eyes says he wants to though. Dark and a little desperate. That look usually curdles Regulus’s stomach. But on James...on James it does something different.

“You’ve made that abundantly clear,” Regulus straddles James’s hips, hand on his chest, pushing him down. He pauses then, hovering above him, letting the fear in him spark and fizzle out. He’s in control, he reminds himself. Everything that happens is up to him.

James is staring at him, biting on his lower lip, looking uncertain.

“I’m saying yes James,” his fingers play with the collar of James’s shirt. “But there are—I have—rules.” He tries not to wince, even though he hates the way that sounds. Laying his weaknesses out so explicitly.

“Okay,” James says, like he doesn’t care. Like it isn’t something to be ashamed of. “Whatever you want.”

Regulus’s chest aches.

“Don’t—“ he struggles to swallow, “don’t touch me.”

James’s hands instantly drop away from where they’d been gripping Regulus’s waist and he almost laughs. Especially at the absolute sincerity on James’s face.

“Not like that, I mean—“ but his voice cuts itself off without Regulus’s permission. Incapable of saying it out loud. Of being explicit.

There’s a pause and then: “Oh,” James says. “Okay, of course.”

“Yes?”

James nods. “Yes Regulus, yes.”

Regulus doesn’t know if he actually likes sex. He’s not sure that he’s ever...enjoyed it. It’s not that he doesn’t think about it, of course he does. But when it comes to the actual thing it’s always left him...whatever that feeling is after you’ve had a good cry? Tired. Delicate. Something like that.

Touching James is different. He wants to kiss every inch of him, wants to pull those breathy little noises out of him. He feels James quiver beneath his hands and something hot shoots through him. He isn’t used to it. He tries not to be afraid.

He likes it when James starts to lose control. Likes it when he spills into his mouth. Likes knowing that he did that. That he made someone...feel good. He likes that James doesn’t try to take his trousers off.

“C’mere,” James reaches for him. Regulus isn’t expecting it so he freezes, not sure what’s happening. What’s coming next. Still, he allows James to pull him down on top of him, allows him to press dirty, open mouthed kisses on his lips. Which also surprises Regulus. He wasn’t expecting him to want to...after.

His skin is getting that too tight feeling it usually does in moments like this, like any second he's going to rip open, like he doesn't have enough room to breathe. He tries to push it away. *Please, please, leave me alone. I want this, I swear I do.* But it doesn't work, it never does.

"I need a minute," he pants, James letting go right away. Regulus drops onto the mattress beside him, trying to get his breathing under control.

"You're sure you don't want—"

Regulus squeezes his eyes shut and shakes his head. James doesn't push, doesn't ask for an explanation, instead Regulus hears the shuffle of blankets and when he opens his eyes again James is on his back, looking up at the painting above their heads.

"Who are they?"

Regulus blinks, turning towards the ceiling.

"That's Achilles," he points to the hero who is dramatically pushing everyone away, "and that's Patroclus," the pale body in his arms.

"He's dead yeah? Pat-row-what's-his-face?"

Regulus bites the inside of his cheek, trying to hold back a smile at James's terrible pronunciation.

"Patroclus. And yes. He's dead," he isn't sure why that statement feels so heavy. Like a curse. A bad omen. Patroclus's corpse sitting, suddenly, in the bed with them. Before Regulus can think better of it he hears himself speaking again: "They were lovers. Knew each other their whole lives, fought beside one another. They were inseparable."

His breathing has evened out and he wonders if James did it on purpose—asking questions. If he knew somehow, that it would take Regulus's mind off of what they had just done. Off of how vulnerable he was, lying there on full display. Or maybe it was just a coincidence.

"What happened?" James asks.

Regulus blinks, directing his attention back to the painting, "Patroclus decided to do something stupid and noble, got himself killed. It destroyed Achilles, he basically lost his mind after that. He refused to bury him at first, and when he finally let them burn the body he made his men promise that when he died they would mix his ashes with Patroclus's, so that they could be together."

James lets out a low whistle. "Jeez Reg, that's like the most depressing story I have ever heard."

Regulus laughs, liking the way it makes James's eyes go bright, makes his cheeks pink just a little bit. James Potter rarely blushes so it's a sight when it happens. "It's—yeah—yeah a bit. But, I don't know. They loved each other. They loved each other more than anything else in the world; more than power, more than glory, more than winning the war. I've never seen that

in real life—never seen people love like nothing else matters. It aches but...in a good way, you know?”

They’re looking at one another unabashedly now. No one’s eyes darting away, no one’s head turning to the side. Regulus rolls forward, closing the gap between them.

“Yeah,” James says after a moment, reaching out to tuck a dark curl behind Regulus’s ear.
“Yeah I know.”

The next morning, after a brief whirlwind of scrambling and chaos, James pauses at the door on his way out, turning back to Regulus, crease lines from the sheets still clear on his face. Everything about him is so soft that it almost frightens Regulus. He wants to protect him. He wants to keep him.

Stupid.

“You okay?” James asks, like he really wants to know. The question pulling Regulus out of his thoughts.

“Yeah James,” he says slowly, afraid of how much he means it. “Yeah, I’m okay. I might even be happy, if you can believe it.”

James’s smile is so bright it almost hurts to look at. But Regulus does. Tries to burn it into his memory, tries to make sure he will never forget.

“Merry Christmas Regulus.”

“Merry Christmas James.”

I love you, Regulus thinks helplessly, watching the door close.

I love you.

I love you.

I love you.

Just—the best part.

PART II REMUS

The flat is empty when he gets home.

For a moment he just stands there, crumpling against the door, staring out at the dark rooms. He knows it's irrational, the spike of fear that immediately drives through his chest. There's no reason for him to expect Sirius to be there. But he can't stop the nervous thoughts.

What if something's happened?

How would you even know?

Eventually he forces himself to move, body heavy as he starts to unpack—which mainly consists of him dumping the contents of his tiny duffle bag into the dirty clothes hamper in the corner of their room.

The bed is unmade, a half-finished glass of water beside it, Sirius's things strewn around the floor. He picks up one of Sirius's t-shirts and clutches it to his chest for a period of time he deems sufficiently pathetic, and then goes into the kitchen to make a cup of tea. There are dirty plates in the sink, a nearly empty bottle of firewhisky on the counter. Remus grimaces.

He reaches for the bottle, holding it in his hands, wondering if he should be worried. Which is a stupid question. Because with Sirius the answer is always yes. He closes his eyes briefly, hands squeezing

"I'm sorry," he whispers.

It's been too long. Too long without seeing him or hearing him or laughing with him. It makes Remus want to tear off his own skin. He looks down at the bottle one last time before placing it back on the counter. He putters around the flat for a little while before eventually forcing himself to sit down on the sofa with a book. It's nearly eight, surely Sirius will be back soon?

Remus can wait.

It's loud voices in the street outside that startle him awake. The book he'd made a pathetic attempt to read slides off his lap and falls to the floor as Remus jolts upright, back and neck stiff. He blinks against the light streaming in from the window—he fell asleep on the sofa. Sirius must have not wanted to wake him.

Or he was too angry to.

Remus pushes that thought away, scrubbing at his face before he gets to his feet and drags himself to the bedroom. He expects to find Sirius, dead to the world, maybe even snoring, but

he doesn't. His feet stutter as he enters the bedroom and finds it just as he left it—empty. Dark.

The nervous thoughts are getting louder now.

Something isn't right here.

Remus doesn't bother trying to fix himself up—doesn't bother to brush his hair or his teeth, to shower, or change his clothes. He feels lightheaded as he moves through the flat towards the fireplace. Voice shaking when he calls out "Godric's Hollow."

Surely if something had happened Moody and Dumbledore would have told him? Right? If something had happened to Sirius someone would have told him? They wouldn't just leave him with an empty flat? James or Peter or Lily or Marlene or Dorcas or Frank—someone would have told him.

The fireplace in front of him flickers for a few moments, long enough that Remus is worried that no one is going to answer until finally James's face appears, eyes growing wide at the sight of him.

"Remus!" he says, surprised.

"He isn't here," Remus blurts out, the least articulate way to phrase what he's trying to say. "He didn't come home last night and I don't know where he is, there's no note or anything, and I'm not sure how long he's been gone but it feels like maybe it's been a while and I don't even know where to start lo—"

"Woah, woah," James holds his hands up. "Steady on, Sirius is fine. He's been staying at mine."

"Oh thank god," Remus lets out a breath he wasn't aware he'd been holding, head dropping down for a minute as he tries to get his pulse back to a normal pace.

"You okay?" James asks gently.

Remus offers him a weak smile when he's finally able to look up. "Scared me is all," the embarrassment is starting to set in—that all it took was one night for Remus to completely lose his cool. "I'm a bit paranoid I guess."

James gives him a sympathetic look. "I think we all are, honestly."

"What is he—" Remus takes a minute, trying to force himself to sound less frantic. "Why is he staying at your's?" he realizes as soon as he asks the question how stupid it is. He knows it drives Sirius mad being alone in their flat.

Something complicated flickers across James's face. "You should—uh—you should come over Moons," there's a pause, James's mouth opening and closing like he can't figure out what to say, eventually he just sighs. "You two should...talk."

Remus nods, hoping the gesture doesn't betray how shaky he feels.

“Alright, yeah, I—give me a few minutes to shower and change and I’ll be right over, okay?”

James’s smile doesn’t reach his eyes. “Sounds good mate.”

Remus tries not to read too much into it.

When Remus steps through the fireplace into the little cottage a half-an-hour later he finds James waiting for him. He’s leaning against his father’s desk, hands in his trouser pockets. Remus is taken aback by the sight of him. He looks...exhausted. Bags under his eyes, skin ashen, a noticeable slouch in his shoulders.

“Hey Moons,” he says, another one of those flickering smiles, like James is a candle about to go out.

Remus stumbles forward. “What’s happened?” he asks, too scared to care about the crack in his voice.

James grimaces. “C’mon, Pete and Sirius are in the living room,” and with that he pushes off the desk and starts walking towards the front of the house, Remus powerless to do anything but follow. He thinks this must be a dream, everything feels a little off, a little unreal. He starts counting his fingers.

“That move’s illegal!” Peter shouts, him and Sirius sitting on opposite sides of the coffee table, a game of Wizard’s chess between them.

“Is not,” Sirius says, watching with a smirk as one of Peter’s pieces is smashed to smithereens by his rook. “I thought you were supposed to be good at this game?”

Peter glowers. “I’m looking this up, there’s no way that’s allowed,” he reaches into the empty box on the floor, pulling out a small pamphlet and immediately flipping through it.

“If it was illegal the pieces wouldn’t have done it.”

Peter scoffs. “They would if they were also dirty cheaters.”

“What!? Peter! How dare you suggest such a thing! These are some of the most honourable chess pieces around,” Remus swears he sees Sirius wink at his Queen. It makes his heart flutter, so reminiscent of the boy he grew up with. Fell in love with.

James clears his throat. “Guys,” he says.

Both of them look up, Sirius’s eyes meeting Remus’s and then instantly dropping back to the board.

“Oh woah, hey Remus! When the fuck did you get back?” Peter asks.

“Uh—“ he stares at Sirius, willing him to look up again, but he doesn’t. “Last night. Didn’t realize everyone was here,” he tries to give Peter a smile but doesn’t quite manage it.

“Yeah, we’ve kinda unofficially moved in since—“

“Pete,” James cuts him off. “Wanna help me get lunch ready?”

Peter blinks. “Aren’t we just ordering takeaway like always?”

“Not today.”

Peter’s eyes slide from Remus to Sirius and then back to James. “Oh,” he says, quickly dropping the rulebook in his hands and getting to his feet. “Right. Yeah, Okay. Lets go.”

Remus feels like any minute he’s going to crumble under the weight of everything going unsaid in this room. James squeezes his shoulder on his way out, Peter chattering at his side about the technicalities of chess.

Remus has no idea what to do, what to say. So he ends up just hovering there, in the middle of the room.

“Sirius—“

“You have a nice trip?” Sirius cuts him off, poking at one of his knights. “Wherever you went.”

Remus doesn’t know how to answer that. Things had been good between them, when he left. The best they’ve been in months honestly. After the visit with Charlotte it felt like some of the resentment faded, like they didn’t have to be so careful with one another. He doesn’t know what’s changed.

“It was…” he trails off. “I don’t know. It just was. Sirius please, tell me what’s happened? I don’t understand what’s going on.”

With the way they’re standing Remus can only see part of Sirius’s face. But he can still read the danger in it. Something barely restrained. Sirius keeps playing with the chess pieces in front of him, pushing and shoving them and generally just egging them on.

“Regulus is dead.”

He says it in such a blank voice that Remus almost doesn’t understand. Going over the words again and again, trying to make sense of them.

“What?”

“Yeah.”

Still Sirius doesn’t look up.

Remus feels like reality is slipping through his fingers. This really must be some sort of dream. He just saw Regulus. Just dragged him out of the Ministry.

An unwelcome image flashes through Remus's mind of a little kid standing behind Sirius on the train. He'd looked so concerned, barely speaking to any of them. Curling in on himself the moment he sat down, like he was afraid of taking up too much space. Now that he thinks about it, James might have been the only one Regulus said a single word to that day. Maybe there was some foreshadowing in that, Remus doesn't know.

"How?" he finally manages to ask.

Sirius flicks over his King, the tiny stone figure sprawling across the board. "He chickened out. Got caught. Voldemort took care of him. Didn't even leave a fucking body when he was finished."

"No body?" Remus feels sick.

A little boy with wide grey eyes and a frowning mouth.

"Nope."

A little boy standing always in his brother's shadow.

Remus doesn't know what to say. What to do. He wants to move, to get down on the floor with Sirius and pull him into his arms but somehow that doesn't feel right. So he stays where he is.

"When did you find out?"

"About a week ago."

A week. Remus feels his face drain of colour. Sirius has been sitting with this, dealing with this, for a week. Without him. It's like Fleamont all over again.

"Sirius, I'm so sor—"

Sirius gets up, nearly knocking the chess board off the table. "I'm going to go see if they need help with lunch," he says, hands shoved in the pockets of his trousers as he heads for the door.

"Sirius—"

But he doesn't stop, keeps his expression blank as he pushes out of the room, Remus listening to the distant sounds of voices down the corridor.

"Fuck," he drops onto the sofa, head in his hands. "Fuck."

This is his fault. Properly his fault. He stayed with Greyback longer than he was meant to because he's been getting worried about Gabe. The more time that passes the more Gabe withdraws and Remus doesn't know what to do. He wants him to go see Ava and Liam, but

he always mutters something about it being too dangerous. Not wanting them to get dragged into this. Remus is still trying to convince Dumbledore to let him bring Gabe to visit Charlotte but he isn't having any luck with that either.

So he stayed.

And Regulus died.

And he wasn't there.

"Sorry."

Remus's head snaps up, finding James standing in the doorway. He sounds almost as tired as he looks.

"I probably should have stayed to referee that," he goes on, which makes Remus laugh.

"I don't think we're supposed to need a referee."

James just shrugs, walking over and sitting down next to him. "He's hurting."

Remus looks at his knees. "I know."

"He gets angry when he's hurting. Self-preservation and all that."

"I know," Remus snaps. "I'm his fucking boyfriend James, I don't need you to explain him to me."

James goes still beside him, a long pause before he speaks. "Sorry, I wasn't trying to—" he stops, sighing. "I don't like it when you guys fight, that's all."

The shame is instant.

Remus takes a deep breath, running a hand over his face. "Sorry," he says finally, knocking their shoulders together. "I shouldn't have—I didn't mean to bite your head off."

James gives him a faint smile. "Nah, you're alright Moons."

He's more defeated than Remus has ever seen him before. And that's what it is really. Defeat. He's seen James angry, and sad—hell, he's seen him fucking devastated—but he's never seen him so close to giving up.

Remus bites on his lower lip, still pressing lightly into James's side. "How are you?"

James lets out a shaky exhale, looking down at his hands. "You know," he says, dry smile pulling at the corner of his mouth. "Fucking awful. But...better with those two assholes around," he nods towards the kitchen. "Gives me something to do."

The guilt is big and heavy in Remus's stomach. "I'm sorry," he says again.

James only shakes his head. “S’ok, not your fault,” there’s a pause and then; “Sirius knows that too.”

Remus swallows with difficulty, unable to muster an answer. Clearly James notices because he keeps going: “He loves you so fucking much, you know? I think it scares him to be honest. That he needs you.”

“I know,” because he does. There was a time when he thought that being with him would help Sirius. Would show him that things could be different. That people could be good to one another. Hubris, he supposes.

There’s a long moment of silence between them. Remus can hear the radio in the kitchen, hear Peter and Sirius squabbling over something, maybe the sound of cutlery being dropped, or—knowing them—thrown.

It takes him that long to realize that someone is missing.

“Where’s Lily?”

James’s face instantly shutters. It’s such an uncommon expression on him that it actually takes Remus aback. “She’s at Mary’s.”

“Mary’s? Why?”

“She’s staying there.” Something’s wrong with James’s voice but Remus can’t quite figure it out.

“Did those knobs annoy her out of her own house?” he asks, but James doesn’t laugh, doesn’t crack a smile, just sits back, running a hand over his face and shaking his head. Remus waits for more of an explanation but after a few minutes pass he realizes he isn’t going to get one.

He nudges James’s foot. “What is it?”

James shakes his head again, opening and closing his mouth a few times before he finally manages to speak, voice small. Helpless. “Regulus died.”

Remus blinks, not understanding, and then—then he sees the crumpled look on James’s face and— “You told her?”

“She knew,” James laughs wetly before squeezing his eyes shut. “Knew for years apparently.”

Remus’s eyes go wide. “Oh—wow—okay, well, I didn’t see that coming,” though he should have. Lily is clever and James is obvious. She probably caught him making heart eyes at Regulus across the Great Hall or something.

“But then...” Remus scrubs at his face. “Why is she at Mary’s?”

James just looks back at him, eyes sad.

“There’s more?” Remus says finally, speaking slowly, careful with his words.

There’s a pause and then; “Yeah,” James croaks. “Yeah there’s more. But I can’t—I can’t right now Remus. I can’t do this again—talk about this again.”

Remus nods. Because he’s not about to push James and because he’s fairly certain he can fill in some of the blanks for himself.

“Okay,” he says finally, “okay.” He reaches out and squeezes James’s arm, still feeling a little shellshocked.

“The attack on the Ministry,” he startles himself when he speaks, not having thought it through. “Regulus could have made that much much worse for us,” he struggles for a moment, to decide what he wants to say. How much he wants to say. “He could have made things much worse for me specifically. And he didn’t. He…well, he protected me I guess. So…I don’t know if that matters but…I thought maybe you’d want to know.”

James just stares at him for a moment. “You’re the leak?” he asks eventually. “The one who tipped Moody off?”

Remus’s stomach feels like it’s tying itself in knots. He can’t speak so he nods instead.

“And Regulus kept your secret?”

They really shouldn’t be having this conversation, but Remus nods anyway.

James makes another pained face.

Open wound, that’s the first thing that comes to Remus’s mind.

“Thank you,” James says quietly.

“Of course.”

They sit in silence for a while, both leaning into one another, listening to the distant noises of Sirius and Peter no doubt destroying James’s kitchen. Remus takes in a deep breath and then exhales. He can still feel it. That undeniable sense of “right” when the four of them are together. Like this is how they were meant to be, always. Wars, love affairs, all of it comes second to this.

To them.

He closes his eyes for a moment, just…feeling it. “You gonna make things right with Lily?” he asks eventually.

He feels James stiffen. “You think I can?”

“I don’t know,” Remus frowns. “But I think you owe it to her to try.”

James lets out a weak laugh. "I'm gonna try," he says, as though that was never a question. "Of course I'm going to try."

"Good. Whatever you did, she didn't deserve it."

"No," James sounds about a hundred years old. "She didn't."

"Oi!"

Peter's voice comes bellowing from the kitchen.

"Lunch is ready!"

Remus turns to James, brow arched. "Out of ten, how inedible is this going to be?"

"Hey!" James punches him playfully. "The three of us can cook alright?"

"Since when?"

James smiles and it's nice. Makes him look more like himself. "It's just beans on toast."

"Ah well, in that case."

They both get up but Remus slows when they reach the corridor, a sinking feeling filling his stomach as he listens to the voices coming from the Kitchen. "Maybe it'd be best if I—"

"No, you're staying," James says decisively. "It's my house. Besides," he gives Remus a meaningful look, "it hasn't felt right without you."

It hasn't felt right without you either, Remus almost says, even though it doesn't make any sense. Even though he's not sure he could explain how much he feels it. The loss of them. Like he's only the faint imprint of himself when they aren't with him. But then, he probably wouldn't have to explain it. At least not to James.

"Ah—fuck," Peter drops his toast onto his plate, fanning his mouth while Sirius rolls his eyes next to him.

"I told you it was hot," he says, blowing on his own food.

"I didn't think it was that hot," Peter says with his tongue half out of his mouth.

The kitchen is an absolute disaster, though Remus reckons that's not only because of lunch. Dishes and wrappers and half eaten food are scattered over the counters and piled in the sink.

"Really?" Remus asks, as James hands him a plate. "Not one of you can manage a cleaning spell?"

James looks around as though only just realizing that there's anything to clean. "I suppose it is getting a bit dingy isn't it?"

Remus arches his brow, sitting down at the table across from Sirius who still isn't making eye contact with him. "A bit dingy?"

"Alright, alright," James chews and swallows. "We'll clean after lunch okay?"

"We?" Peter demands, looking genuinely concerned. "I don't remember agreeing to that."

"A little housework isn't gonna kill you Peter," Remus says flatly.

"You don't know that."

Sirius snorts. "He has a point." Remus tries to catch his eye.

James glares at the pair of them. "Oh, I'm sorry, is there some other kitchen the two of you have been using that I'm not aware of?" both of them remain sullenly quiet. "No? That's what I thought. You helped mess it up, you can help clean."

Sirius rolls his eyes, but Peter opens his mouth: "Why can't you just get a new house elf already?" there's a petulant tone to his voice, reminiscent of an unhappy toddler.

Everyone at the table freezes, Remus looking from Peter to James and back again. James's face has been wiped of all good humour, Peter realizing his mistake immediately.

"Not that—not that Mimi wasn't like, important and stuff."

"Family, you mean."

Something seems to flicker in Peter's eyes that Remus can't quite figure out, but as soon as it appears it's gone. "Yeah, right. I'm not trying to say she's replaceable."

"Just that I should hurry up and replace her?" James asks coldly, making Peter squirm.

Remus decides to cut this off before it goes too far. "Plenty of people manage to clean their houses without a house elf. I think we'll survive, yeah?"

He looks between his two friends, the tension still so thick he can practically taste it.

"Yeah, definitely," it's Sirius who eventually speaks, nudging Peter with his elbow. "Right Pete?"

Peter's eyes are still locked on James's but eventually he nods, swallowing with some difficulty. "Yeah, of course," he looks down at his toast.

The rest of the meal is significantly quieter.

Peter and Sirius do help clean, and with relatively little complaint. Though Remus catches Peter mumbling curses under his breath a couple times, especially when his water charm ends

up spraying him in the face. Still, they manage to get through most of the mess before they lose them; Peter wandering into the living room and, judging by the ensuing noises, promptly taking a nap, and Sirius disappearing into the back garden.

Remus stares at the back door, an ache in his chest. It's hard to be away. But it's always harder to be back and still not be able to touch him. To see him and still feel the distance between them like an insurmountable wall.

"Go on then."

Remus starts and then fumbles, struggling not to drop the plate in his hands, looking up to find James staring at him with amusement. The other boy gestures for Remus to hand over the dinnerware.

"Sorry," Remus mutters, reaching for the next dish.

"Moons," James sounds fond but exasperated, "leave the bloody dishes and go fucking talk to him."

"It's fine. I'll help you finish," he insists stubbornly, earning him a frustrated sigh.

"Mate, if I have stand here and watch you spend another fifteen minutes drying the same plate *I'M* going to break something."

Remus blinks, looking at the plate in James's hands and then back up. "Oh, sorry I got..." his eyes slide over to the back door, "distracted."

"Yeah, I got that," he rips the tea towel out of Remus's hands.

"Hey—"

"Just go," James nudges him towards the door. "Please, for all our sakes."

Remus frowns but James has already turned back to the dishes, apparently deciding to ignore him. He considers arguing some more, but, unfortunately, this happens to be one of the few moments in which James is actually being sensible. After another second of hesitating in front of the door, he slips his boots on and pushes outside.

He instantly casts a warming charm over himself because it's fucking cold, even with the sun out in full force. Remus crosses his arms over his chest as he walks down the slope in the Potter's back garden towards the Quidditch pitch.

He doesn't see Sirius until he's almost under him—flying around the miniature goal posts Fleamont charmed into existence back when James could still barely walk. Remus shields his eyes with his hand as he stares up at Sirius, speeding through the sky, dark hair whipping behind him.

He's beautiful when he flies.

Well,

he's beautiful all the time.

Remus sits down on the ground, knees bent, waiting.

And waiting.

And waiting.

But Sirius doesn't come down, and Remus isn't sure if it's because he's avoiding him or because he really just doesn't want to. His teeth bite into his lower lip as he watches Sirius go round and round and round until eventually he can't stand it anymore.

Admittedly, this is a terrible idea. He knows it even before he swings his leg over the broom handle, even before he pushes off, clumsily, into the air.

"Oh fuck, oh fuck, oh fuck." He closes his eyes and then, realizing how ridiculously unhelpful that is, forces them to open again.

He hates flying, at least by broom, doesn't know how James and Sirius do it. He feels completely unstable and vulnerable. There is absolutely nothing sturdy or comforting about a fucking broom. Of all the household objects wizards could enchant to fly, he's not sure why it couldn't have been a mattress or an armchair.

He wobbles, hands shaking as they grip the handle. This was a mistake. This was such a mistake. He's going to fall to his death before he ever manages to speak to Sirius. God, flying broomsticks are so fucking stupid. So fucking—

"What're you doing?"

Remus's head snaps up, causing his broom to bob and him to drop down, pressing his chest to the handle and clinging on for dear life.

"Trying to talk to you," he says in a strained voice, staring up at Sirius who is floating in front of him, a confused look on his face. He's sweaty despite the cold, but Remus supposes flying neurotically around a Quidditch Pitch will do that to you.

"You hate flying," Sirius says finally. Which seems a bit redundant to Remus, but given the current state of their relationship he manages to refrain from pointing that out.

"I wanted to talk to you," he repeats instead.

Sirius watches him for another minute, that same confused look on his face, like he's trying to work something out, before eventually he flies forward.

"Here," he says, reaching over and placing his hand on Remus's shoulder. "You're making this harder than it has to be."

"Woah, woah," Remus says as Sirius starts to try and push him upright again. "What're you doing?"

“You’re not sitting right.”

“I’m sitting just fine.”

Sirius huffs. “Just let me—I’m trying to help. Could you just trust me, please?”

And for a moment their eyes meet, and Remus can tell by the look on Sirius’s face that he hadn’t meant to say those words. Hadn’t meant to drag up all that baggage. A thousand different meanings suddenly floating in the air between them.

Finally, Remus exhales. “Okay,” he says, relaxing enough that Sirius is able to gently push him upright again. Keeping one hand on his shoulder and placing the other on Remus’s lower back, shifting him toward the tail end of his broom.

“There you go,” Sirius says softly. Remus looks over at him, still terrified, though momentarily distracted by how close Sirius is. By the way his sweaty hair curls at his temples and ears.

“And then just,” Sirius lets go of his torso and Remus is surprised to find that he actually does feel more stable, “put your hands like this,” his tongue sticks out between his lips as he carefully adjusts Remus’s hands, the contact making Remus shiver. And maybe he’s imagining it. Maybe it’s wishful thinking. But he swears Sirius holds onto them for several seconds longer than is strictly necessary.

“There,” he pulls back slowly, “better?”

Remus swallows, throat tight. He knows that it’s the flying and the cold that have put the pink in Sirius’s cheeks, but he can’t help staring at it anyway. “Yeah,” he manages finally, voice rough, “better.”

Sirius nods and for a long moment they just float there, wind pushing against them, rocking them like ships. Remus does his best not to start hugging his broom handle again.

“So,” Sirius finally clears his throat, looking off into the distance, “you wanted to talk?”

He had. He really had. Except now that he’s here he has no idea what to say.

“I don’t want to fight,” is what he decides on finally. Childish? Yes, perhaps. But succinct. Honest. Brutally, painfully honest.

He watches Sirius chew on the inside of his cheek, still staring into the distance. “I’m not fighting,” he manages finally. “That’s what I’ve been—that’s what I’m trying not to do.”

And of course, as soon as he says it, Remus can see all the ways it’s true. Sirius has been walking away from him all day. Walking away when normally he would shout and yell and fume.

“It’s still kinda fighting though,” Remus says eventually. “Different maybe but…you’re punishing me. Aren’t you?”

Sirius sighs, scrubbing at his face. “I don’t know what you want me to do Remus?” he says finally. “I don’t know how to not be angry about this.”

Which is fair.

More than, really.

Remus follows Sirius’s gaze. The sky is almost cartoonish today—light blue, with big, fat, white clouds.

“Regulus loved flying,” Sirius says suddenly, making Remus start.

He opens and then closes his mouth. It’s not the kind of statement that really requires a response, so instead he watches Sirius, waits for him to say more.

“He was going to go pro,” Sirius goes on eventually. “You know there were already scouts looking at him? Back when he was at Hogwarts?”

Remus hadn’t—though, in fairness, Remus knows very little when it comes to the workings of Quidditch. Still, it surprises him that Sirius knows this. He wonders, suddenly, if there’s the chance that Sirius has been keeping a closer eye on his little brother all these years than Remus realized.

“He was going to have his pick. He was going to be a fucking star. Probably play in the world series he—“ Sirius’s voice breaks and he stops, closing his eyes for a minute, making Remus’s heart ache. “How did we get here?” Sirius whispers, face scrunching. “How the fuck did we get here?”

And despite the unbelievable terror it strikes into his heart, Remus lifts one hand off his broom and reaches out, squeezing Sirius’s arm.

“You know, sometimes,” Sirius says weakly. “I wonder, if there hadn’t been a war, would he have left that house with me? Would their hold on him have been weaker, if everything wasn’t so...scary.”

Remus doesn’t know what to say to that, eventually offering up a pathetic, “Maybe.”

But Sirius only shakes his head. “But is it the war that made him do what he did? Or was that always in him? Was that person always there? Was he always going to be...like them? Or was it...but he said he regretted it, so I don’t know. Fuck I don’t know anymore”

Remus blinks, surprised. “He did? He said he regretted joining Voldemort? When?”

Sirius’s eyes open. “What?”

“When did he say he regretted it?”

“Oh,” Sirius looks suddenly embarrassed, which doesn’t make sense to Remus. “He didn’t. Never mind. I don’t know why I said that.”

Which Remus doesn't buy, but he decides to leave it alone. At least for now.

"I'm sorry," he says instead, finally bringing Sirius's eyes back to him.

The other boy gives him a sad smile. "Yeah. Aren't we all."

It's like looking at James all over again. Like losing Regulus has severed whatever thin thread of childhood they were both still clinging to. The ghost of that hope, that naivety, that belief in themselves—that they were kings, that they could do anything. The spark that made them James Potter and Sirius Black has been snuffed out.

Remus's hand slides from Sirius's arm to his face, holding it carefully, finger brushing over his cheek.

"I love you, you know," he says, because it's all he has at this point. He can't go back and change what's happened. Can't fix anything. All he has is love. Which the stories and the poets like to make a big fuss about.

All you need is love.

As they say.

It's bollocks, of course.

A dying man might be loved but it won't put the air back in his lungs.

And that's what they are these days, isn't it?

Dying men.

Sirius's eyes open, the light catching them, making them glow, making Remus's breath hitch, snagging on his ribs. After a moment Sirius turns his head and kisses Remus's palm.

"I love you too."

PART III JAMES

James is outside Mary's house.

It's probably a mistake.

Which is why he's still standing in the street two hours after getting there, not quite able to make himself walk up to the front door.

Because this is probably a mistake.

But what else is there?

He paces back and forth, hands running through his hair as his fingers start to go numb from the cold. His thoughts are all jumbled up, nerves making them tangle themselves in knots. He tries to pick them apart, place them in neat rows. Make sense of them. It doesn't matter how many times he thinks about what he's going to say. What he's going to do. He can't make himself move any closer.

Being in limbo, not knowing where he and Lily stand, whether or not she's going to come back, whether or not they'll be able to get past this, it's torture. Really, it is. It eats him up. But at least it still gives him hope. A chance. Schrödinger's relationship. As soon as he knocks on that door he loses that. There will no longer be a reality in which their relationship is both alive and dead. It'll be one or the other. And he'll have to live with that.

He's almost positive he can't.

"You know," James jumps, spinning around to find Mary leaning casually against her front door, "people are going to start calling the cops if you keep lurking out here."

James blinks, trying to keep his anxiety in check. "I'm not lurking."

"You look pretty lurky to me."

"I'm just standing."

"And pacing."

James rolls his eyes. "Okay, yeah, and pacing."

"Outside my house. For hours."

James lets out a sigh, but instead of walking towards her sinks down onto the curb, resting his elbows on his knees and holding his head. He can't do this. He can't. He has to, but he can't.

After a few minutes he feels Mary sit beside him. She's cut her hair since he last saw her. He probably wouldn't have noticed except he's never seen her with short hair before—a tight, curly afro framing her face. It's jarring because it's different. Because it's new. Because he's known Mary since they were both eleven and suddenly she looks like an adult and he doesn't understand how that's happened. Part of him hates it. Wants things to stay as they were. Wants everyone to stay as they were.

It's childish and doesn't make him feel particularly good about himself.

"Does Lily know I'm out here?" he asks finally, after a long drawn out pause.

Mary snorts. "If Lily knew you were out here *she* would be out here."

James turns to look at her, trying and failing to work out her expression. No one hides their feelings quite as well as Mary. Not even Sirius. "And you...don't want that?" he asks finally.

"*You* don't want that," she corrects. "That's why you've been creeping up and down the pavement for the entire afternoon."

James pouts. "I haven't been creeping."

"Mmhm," Mary pulls out a small carton from her back pocket. Placing a cigarette between her fingers before she offers him the box. "Want one?"

James wrinkles his nose. "Hell sticks."

"Pardon moi?" Mary asks, slightly amused.

He nods at the cigarettes. "Fucking hell sticks. You and Lily, I don't know how you do it."

Mary smirks, sliding her's into her mouth and snapping her fingers to light it. "Lily isn't smoking anything at the moment," she says, inhaling deeply and a second later tilting her head back and blowing the smoke up into the sky. "Y'know, you have real shit timing."

James just looks at her, not sure what to make of that, causing Mary to wave her hand impatiently. "Dropping this all on her when she's pregnant. I mean, there are the obvious reasons it makes you a complete dickhead."

"Thanks."

"No problem. But then there's the fact that she can't do any of the things you're supposed to do when someone breaks your heart."

James winces. He never wanted to break Lily's heart. Never thought he could. Always so certain it would be the other way around.

"She can't drink, can't smoke, can't do recreational substances of any kind," she takes another drag from her cigarette. "She could get a haircut I suppose."

"Is that why you cut yours?" James asks before he can stop himself.

Mary looks at him out of the corner of her eye. "Wouldn't you like to know?"

There's a moment of silence before eventually James groans, scrubbing at his face and then holding out his hand. "Fuck it. Give me one of those."

Mary smirks, passing the carton over and watching with increasing amusement as James awkwardly places a cigarette in his mouth.

"You've gotta inhale alright?" Mary says as she positions her fingers at the tip.

James rolls his eyes at her. "I know how it works," he mumbles around the cigarette. Mary only grins, snapping her fingers and making the tip glow. James breathes in and instantly regrets every decision he's made in the last few seconds.

The smoke scorches his throat and lungs, and the scratchy dry heat instantly has him coughing, smoke pouring from his mouth.

Mary laughs. “Oh my god, you are tragic.”

James glares at her through his watering eyes, before leaning over and spitting on the ground. “These things are vile,” he says, bringing it back to his lips for some reason and inhaling again. It’s almost an automatic response. It still feels awful the second time but the coughing is somewhat more sedated. “Merlin, I’m so glad neither of you showed these to Sirius.”

Mary snorts. “Never. That wanker would make them his entire personality.”

James laughs and it feels good, even if he coughs a little bit afterwards.

For a while they just sit there, James very much aware that Mary is waiting for him to speak. To explain himself. He just...doesn’t know where to start.

“How is she then?” he finally manages, dreading the answer.

Mary gives him a bemused look. “How’s who? You’re pregnant girlfriend whomst you lied to and cheated on?” Mary lets out a long exhale, smoke easing from the corner of her mouth. “She’s peachy.”

“Mary,” he says wearily.

“What?” for the first time there’s the tiniest edge of anger in her tone. Honestly, James is surprised it’s taken this long to show up. “What would you like me to say?” and when he just continues to stare at her she rolls her eyes. “She’s...she’s confused mostly, if you want to know the truth. It’s like you’ve gone and changed it all. She thought she knew you, thought she knew your relationship, and then suddenly everything is different,” Mary exhales. “It’s a lot to adjust to.”

James fidgets with the cigarette in his hand more than he smokes it, rolling it between his fingers, knocking the ash off the end, knee bouncing up and down.

“I didn’t want to hurt her,” he cringes at himself. It’s such a generic phrase it belongs on a greeting card.

Mary lets the silence stretch on for an unnecessarily long time. Lets James sit in his embarrassment. “You didn’t want to hurt her,” she repeats finally. “Or you didn’t want her to *feel* hurt?”

That knocks James sideways. “What?”

Mary pauses again, forcing him to meet her stare. “Have you ever had someone apologize to you by saying “I’m sorry you’re upset”? Not “I’m sorry I did it” not “I was wrong” but I’m sorry you’re upset? I’m sorry you’re making this a problem—“

“That isn’t what I mean.”

Mary arches her brow. “You sure about that?”

“I—“ but his voice cuts out. Truth is, James isn’t sure of very much at the moment. He sighs, frustrated, trying to get his thoughts in order for the thousandth time that day.

“I guess maybe I...” he looks very determinedly at his hands, “Maybe I thought that—I hoped that...” he trails off, laughing without humour. “That it wouldn’t hurt her, I guess. That maybe she would understand,” he briefly squeezes his eyes shut, forcing these vulnerable dreams out into the world. The ones that now taste like ash in his mouth. “I hoped that maybe we were meant to be this way, you know? That I was meant to be with them both. And they would be able to feel that too,” his next inhale shakes. “I really wanted her to understand. Because it just doesn’t...feel wrong to me.”

He can sense Mary scrutinizing him, dark, clever eyes running him over. “Being with Regulus?” she asks neutrally, tone unreadable.

James shakes his head. “Loving them both,” he opens his eyes. “It doesn’t feel wrong loving them both. I know that it’s supposed to. But that itch that tells you you’re doing the wrong thing, it was never there. Or at least never here,” he taps his chest.

Mary watches him for a moment longer before letting out a heavy sigh. “Merlin, you really are a disaster aren’t you?”

That surprises James into a laugh, grateful for the break in tension. “Yeah, absolutely.”

“I mean you’ve fucked this up about as much as you possibly could.”

“I realize that.”

“And I will vehemently deny this if you tell anyone,” Mary goes on, pulling James’s attention away from his hands, “and if Lily decides she wants to leave you I will be right there with her, cheering her on, boxing up her stuff,” the image makes James’s stomach twist painfully. “But I’m still rooting for you James Potter.”

A slight prickling sensation suddenly materializes behind James’s eyes that he has to quickly blink away. He wasn’t expecting that from Mary. Not after...everything. “Oh,” he says, and then, before he can stop himself; “Still? I wasn’t aware you were rooting for me in the first place.”

Mary snorts, knocking his shoulder with her’s, James returning the gesture. He takes a drag of his cigarette, just to distract himself from the emotions swelling in his stomach and maybe give him an excuse for the wetness in his eyes. Cars drive past along the street, the sound of children playing echoing from somewhere a few houses down.

Something tugs at James’s chest. A new feeling of guilt—or perhaps more accurately, an old feeling resurfacing. It’s been a long time since him and Mary have talked. Properly talked. Something has lodged itself between them, built a wall neither of them seemed willing to acknowledge or climb. But things have changed now. Everything is in the open.

“Listen, I’ve been meaning to—“ he stops, grimacing at the business like tone of his voice. He clears his throat and tries to start again, hands shaking so badly he has to drop his cigarette, putting it out with the heel of his trainer. Mary watches him curiously.

“What happened to you...at school—“ frustratingly his voice cuts out again, but he sees understanding light up Mary’s face.

“Ah,” she says. “Yes, being attacked and then having my memory completely fucked by your boyfriend. Please do go on. I’m interested to see where this goes.”

James grimaces. Mary has the uncanny ability to put things in a way that allows you no escape. Like having the lights turned on. The curtains pulled back. The mask torn off. James’s mouth has suddenly gone dry.

“I’m sorry,” the limits of the English language have never been more apparent to him than in this moment. Because that isn’t close to what he means. To how much he means.

Mary’s face remains unreadable. “I’m going to need you to be more specific. What exactly are you sorry for?”

Regulus is suddenly sitting between them. Maybe he’s been there the whole time. Maybe he’s been there for years. The wall they didn’t want to acknowledge. To climb over.

Eventually James forces himself to speak. “I wanted to be there for you.”

She nods slowly. “Funny way of showing it.”

“I know,” James cringes. “I know, it just felt like—“ he tries to explain. “At the time, it just felt like so much was happening all at once and it was all so big and so fucking awful and I just...I didn’t know what to do. I didn’t know how to handle any of it.” It isn’t that he can’t hear how that sounds. How inadequate. But that doesn’t stop it from being true. He hadn’t known what to do.

He’d only been sixteen.

“But I should have been there for you,” he’s saying this all wrong. “I should have...figured it out sooner. What to do. What was right.” It still isn’t good enough. Nothing ever will be.

Silence follows. The noise of James’s own pulse loud in his ears. He’s sweating despite the cold.

“And what if I can’t forgive you?” Mary asks finally. It isn’t angry. Isn’t mean. She looks at him with honest curiosity.

“That’s not why I’m apologizing,” he says. “I don’t want anything from you Mary. I just—I needed you to know. That I’m sorry. That I haven’t forgotten. That I’ll never forget.” He sounds like a little kid and he can’t help wondering when that’ll stop. When do adults start sounding like adults?

There's silence, but after a few seconds of tension Mary knocks their shoulders together again. "Thank you," the words sound awkward and stiff in her mouth. She really is so much like Sirius.

He doesn't know how to respond—he certainly isn't about to say "you're welcome." Thankfully, Mary saves him the trouble.

"It never really stopped after then, did it?"

James can feel his face scrunching in confusion. "What do you mean?"

She waves her cigarette in the air. "Things happening all at once. Big things. Awful things. Things none of use knew how to handle. It feels like it started then, started with that, and then it just..." she trails off, gesturing into the distance.

James waits a moment before nodding. He feels like he hasn't been able to catch his breath in ages.

"There's only four of them now."

James looks at her. "Four of who?"

"Them," she repeats, staring across the street. And then she holds her hand up and begins ticking names off on her fingers: "Snape, Mulciber, Avery and Crouch," there's something sharp in her voice. Something that wants to slice and tear and rip things apart. "Two dead. Four living," and now she turns to James. "I'm gonna outlive them all. Just to fucking spite them. Live until the last one of them takes their finally pathetic breath. Hell," the corner of her mouth twitches upward, "maybe I'll even kill them myself."

From anyone else that would be a figure of speech. A bit of drama. But from Mary, it is almost certainly a promise.

Before anymore can be said she's dropping her cigarette in the gutter and getting to her feet. "Well, are you ready?"

"Ready?"

"To talk to Lily? You know, the whole reason you're here?"

"Oh," James's stomach instantly drops into the soles of his shoes. "Yeah, I—yeah, okay," he moves to get up too but Mary waves him off.

"Nah, stay there. If she decides to murder you I don't want blood on my carpet. Real pain to get out that, even with magic."

Despite his nerves he can't help but snort. "Appreciate the vote of confidence Macdonald."

"Anytime Potter," she calls over her shoulder as she heads back towards the house.

But something isn't quite sitting right with James. "Hey—Mary?" he calls out, stopping her at the door. She turns around with an exasperated look on her face. Probably expecting him to chicken out, but that isn't what it is.

"What I said before, about wishing I could have been there for you," he sees the smallest flicker of surprise before she wipes it away. "That isn't—that isn't really what I was trying to say. I mean, it is, but there's more than that. I feel like it makes it seem like—"

"You're babbling Potter."

He runs a frustrated hand through his hair and tries to get his thoughts in order. "I wish I could have been there for you then, but I also want you to know that I'm here for you now. If you need to talk. If you need..." he loses his words. "If you need anything, okay? I'm here."

Mary just stares at him, expression blank, and after a few seconds James can't stop himself from saying more.

"You're the strongest person I know Mary, honestly. Which is saying something, considering the people I know. You can handle it all on your own, I just—you shouldn't have to."

Something flashes in her eyes that he can't quite place. "I'm just as the world made me."

James flounders. Not knowing what to say. Not even quite knowing what she means. Clearly seeing what a loss he's at, Mary takes pity on him.

"I'll let you know if I need anything, alright Potter?"

"Yeah," he manages, breathing out a sigh of relief. "Yeah alright, deal."

She doesn't say anything else, turning around and heading back inside.

James watches the door, hands rubbing nervously up and down his thighs. He feels like he hasn't seen Lily in ages and he fucking misses her. But as more time passes he starts to worry that maybe she isn't coming. That she doesn't want to speak to him. It was always a possibility, just one he was hoping was really, really unlikely. That might have been optimistic of him.

Then the door opens.

And she's there.

James has a visceral memory of the first time he ever saw Lily. He had never felt anything as strongly or as suddenly as he'd felt the urge to be near her. To get her attention, to make her laugh, smile. Of course, he didn't manage much of that in those first years—there was a lot more indignation and glaring. Not that it mattered. He had just wanted the chance to orbit around her for a few minutes. Few seconds.

"Hey," she says, causing James to come back to the present.

He's stood up...for some reason...Lily by the door, like she isn't sure if it's safe to come any closer. Looking at her still makes him feel the same as it did when he was eleven—like he never wants to be anywhere Lily isn't ever again. Except that now that feeling is tied up in guilt and sadness and a bunch of fucking pain.

“Hey,” James finally manages.

Neither of them move. The world suddenly going quiet, like it's just them. Lily looks tired, and not entirely pleased to see him, but she isn't aiming her wand at him so James figures that's at least something.

“I thought maybe we should...talk.” He braces himself for rejection. He's had lots of practice being rejected by Lily Evans. If she tells him to go he will. It'll break his fucking heart but he will.

“Yeah,” Lily says eventually, “okay.” James sees her take a deep breath before she starts walking forward.

He'd thought the hardest thing was not seeing her, but maybe he was wrong. Maybe it's harder to see her and know that in some profound way he has lost the privilege of belonging to her. Of having her. Of being had.

He clears his throat. “Er—well, I guess maybe we should...” he gestures to the curb like he's pulling out a chair and sees the faintest flicker of a smile on her face.

“Right, sure.”

They both sit down on the cold ground, James quickly casting a warming charm. He sees Lily stiffen the moment he does, eyes closing for a second.

“Sorry,” he doesn't know how he's managed to screw this up already. “I can get rid of it if it bothers you, I just thought...because of the cold...”

Lily shakes her head. “No, it's fine I...I guess it's been a little while since I've felt your magic,” she opens her eyes and gives him a weak smile. “Wasn't expecting it to...effect me quite so much.”

James isn't sure what to do with that, doesn't know if it's a good thing or a bad thing. Wishes he could wipe the sadness out of Lily's eyes.

“You wanted to talk?” she says, after an overly long pause.

“Oh—yeah, I—yeah,” he sighs, scrubbing at his face. He needs a second, to get his thoughts in order. He's thrown off by...by whatever they are right now. There's never really been silence between them before. There was anger and passion and friendship and love but never...restraint. Never fear. He thinks that might be what hurts the most. That when she looks at him now, there is fear hidden in the corners of her eyes.

Eventually James reaches into his jacket pocket and pulls out a small vial of clear liquid.

“What—“ but Lily stops, and James can practically see the cogs turning in her head. Narrowing down potions by colour, consistency, relevancy. What could James have possibly brought with him here?

“Veritaserum?” she almost whispers, eyes bouncing from the vial to his face and back again.

James nods without really looking up at her, turning the potion over in his hands. “I reckon that you probably don’t have...the most trust in me right now,” he grimaces. “Which is fair. But I don’t want you to have to wonder whether or not I’m telling the truth, you know?”

He looks up and finds her eyes wide—he’s never seen anything quite like them, her eyes. He swears they’re made of magic.

She’s so lovely.

His Lily.

It’s hard to think that and not feel as though he’s betraying Regulus. But it’s true. They were always his. Or maybe, more accurately, he was always their’s. He belonged to them. Both of them.

His grief doesn’t make him love Lily less.

He simply is...less.

Less without Regulus.

“I can’t ask you to do this James,” she says finally.

Now it’s his turn to give her a sad smile. “You aren’t asking. I am. Let me do this Lily—let me make this...” he searches for the right words. “As easy as it can be.”

She considers him, green eyes thoughtful as they run him over, and he lets her. James Potter has never been one to hide his feelings. Slowly, Lily nods.

“What do you want me to ask you?”

“Whatever you want.”

“James,” she cautions, because it is quite something to open yourself up completely, to set no boundaries, to place all your inner thoughts and feelings on display, even the ones you didn’t realize you had. But then, it seems only fair, after everything that’s happened.

“Whatever you want Lils,” he says again. “I trust you.”

She bites her lower lip, still looking uncertain. “Okay,” she says quietly. “Don’t take too much.”

He smiles at her. “You got it,” he pulls the cork out with his teeth, swallowing a mouthful before he can get too nervous. “That oughta give us, what? An hour?”

Lily nods. "About, yeah."

"I can always take more if you need me to." He puts the cork back in the bottle and slides it into his jacket pocket.

"I'm sure an hour will be enough."

He can already feel the effects taking hold. The buzzing beneath his skin, the loosening of the dozens of knots tying his truths down, allowing them all to float to the surface.

"Okay," James says after a few more minutes, turning to face Lily properly. "I'm pretty sure we're good."

She looks at him, Lily's always had the ability to pin him to the spot.

"Are you okay?" she asks finally, which isn't what he was expecting at all. He can feel his brows drawing up in surprise while his mouth opens:

"No."

He can't help laughing. Maybe it's nerves. Or the desire to avoid the weight of that confession.

Lily only nods, taking it in. "The day of the attack on the Ministry, was that the only time you saw Regulus after he left school?"

"No," the answer is once again out of him before he has any real time to think, Lily's face instantly clouding over. "He was one of the Death Eaters who broke into the shop me and Marlene were guarding," he explains quickly. "That's the only other time I saw him."

"You never went to his house?"

James shakes his head. "Just that once."

"Never wrote to him?"

James swallows, thinking of the letter back at the cottage, the one he's been rereading almost every night since he first opened it. "Not after Hogwarts," he manages finally.

"But—" her voice cuts out and she grits her teeth. "But you loved him? Until the end?"

"Still," James winces. "I still love him."

Lily lets out a tragic sounding laugh. Running her hands over her face as she shakes her head, looking away. James has the overwhelming urge to reach out to her, but he keeps his hands balled in his lap.

"Ask me if I love you too," he says instead.

"God, James—"

“Please. Ask me if I love you.”

She looks back at him, eyes glassy. Angry. Disappointed. It feels like a long time before she speaks. “Do you love me?”

“Yes,” the word runs out of his mouth. It hurts when he sees actual surprise on her face. “Of course, I love you.”

Lily looks down for a minute, clearly struggling with herself.

“You know,” she says, after a long pause. “I really didn’t think that was going to be the answer.”

“Lily—“

“Not under the Veritaserum.”

“I love you. I promise.”

Lily blinks a few times, tears spilling over her cheeks that she quickly wipes away. “I don’t—I don’t really see how that’s possible James.”

He hates this.

“It is. I promise it is.”

More tears make it down her face and she lets out a frustrated noise, tilting her head back and closing her eyes.

“I fucking hate crying in fights,” she says, only barely talking to James. “It makes me feel so...out of control. So weak.”

“You aren’t weak.”

She scoffs, “You don’t think?”

And he isn’t sure what to do with that—what she means by it. Lily opens her eyes again, scrubbing angrily at her face with the sleeve of her jacket.

“I want to come home so badly,” she whispers, not looking at James. “I miss you—talking to you, touching you, falling asleep with you. After everything that’s happened, how can wanting that not make me weak?”

James swallows with difficulty. “I’m not sure I can answer that question.”

“No,” Lily laughs and snuffles at the same time, wiping her nose. “No I suppose you can’t.” She stares down at her hands, picking them apart for a minute before she speaks again. “Do you—“ her voice wobbles. “Do you still want this baby?”

James feels like the air has just been punched out of his lungs. “Yes.”

“Is that the reason you stayed? After you went to Grimmauld? Was it the baby?”

He shakes his head even though she still isn't looking at him. “No. I love you. I want to be with you.”

“As much as you wanted to be with him?” and finally her eyes flick up, making James's heart do all manner of clumsy things in his chest.

“Yes,” he whispers. She doesn't let him go, gaze holding him down.

“Was I your second choice? Regulus left school and then we got together, if he had stayed—“

James shakes his head. “We'd already...finished, before he left. He—“ James has to take a moment, eyes squeezing shut. “I thought I could...I don't know...get him to see things differently. But he—it all went a bit wonky sixth year. All went a bit...wrong.”

His chest grows tight at the memories. At how lost and how scared and how overwhelmed he'd felt. How hard it had been to make sense of the boy he knew and the person who had hurt his friend. Had gotten the Dark Mark branded on his skin.

He hadn't wanted to accept it.

Honestly, he still struggles to.

James exhales, forcing his eyes open again, finding Lily watching him carefully.

“You aren't a replacement or a second choice is what I'm trying to say,” he finally manages, before giving her small smile. “I mean, you're Lily Evan's for Godric's sake.”

Lily lets out a wet laugh, shaking her head. “I still don't know what that means.”

“That's because you get to be you all the time. The rest of us have to go without you every once and a while. Have to experience how flat life becomes when you're not around.”

She rolls her eyes. “Sounds terrible.”

“It is,” his voice is more sincere than he intends, maybe it's the Veritaserum. For a moment it feels like they're both holding their breath.

Eventually Lily shakes her head. “I don't know where we go from here.”

James takes in a shaky breath. “Come home.”

“James—“

“Not because everything is fixed,” he explains quickly. “I know that it isn't. And I'll—you know—I'll sleep in Sirius's room, whatever you need, to feel comfortable. But come home so we can...try.” He looks at her imploringly. “I want to try Lily. Don't you?”

He can see her arguing with herself and he does his best not to push anymore. Not to fidget, not to look away, not to let the fear in his gut show on his face. Because what if she doesn't? What will he do then?

"Okay," she says the word slowly, like she's testing out how it feels on her tongue.

James does his best to keep his bouncing heart under control. "Yeah?"

"Not because everything is fixed," she repeats his words back to him. "But because I want to try."

James nods his head vigorously. "Yes, okay, yes. That's—thank you." And suddenly James can't help it anymore. "Can I—can I hug you?"

Lily looks surprised for a moment and then her face softens. "Yeah James, you can hug me."

Less than a second later she's in his arms, holding him as close as he holds her. James feels his whole body relax at the contact, burying his face in her hair and breathing her in. Warmth sings through his veins, making him feel...settled. James will never be full again, but at least here, in Lily's arms, he doesn't feel quite so fucking empty.

"Okay," she sighs, pulling back much to James's dismay. She meets his eyes, her's a little red but determined. "Let me get my stuff."

It isn't until the moment that they walk through the front door that James remembers his house is full of Marauders.

"Shit," he says, as loud, belligerent yelling comes from the kitchen. "I forgot they were here." Well, he didn't forget exactly, he's just gotten so used to them being there that he forgot that they aren't usually.

"You really think you can beat me? Really?"

"Of course I think I can beat you! You don't know anything about strategy! You just make things up!"

"Been working pretty well for me in Chess."

"Because you're cheating!"

"Am not."

"Are too."

"Am not!"

James turns to Lily who, thankfully, instead of looking angry or horrified, is laughing.

“I can tell them to go—I mean—I will tell them to go, obviously,” he ignores the part of him that desperately doesn’t want to, even though Lily is here now. It’s been nice, the four of them back together these past few days, living with one another, like old times. It’s been too easy to get used to it. Get comfortable with it. It’s the only good thing to come out of any of this really.

“Are they all here?” Lily asks.

“Yeah—like I said, I’ll tell them to—“

But Lily waves him off. “No don’t, I haven’t seen them in ages.” She puts her bag down, coat and boots already off, shoving James towards the kitchen.

“C’mon lets go see what all the yelling is about.”

“You’re sure?” James asks nervously. “Because I swear I’ll throw the dickheads out, right now.”

Lily lets out a small huff. “I’m sure. Go on.”

He wonders if maybe she feels it too—the anxiety about being alone together. About having to try to go back to normal. About how wrong it’ll all feel now, their house, their life, everything changed.

“You can’t just make up your own rules and pretend you’re winning!” Peter’s face is bright red as he shouts at a considerably less bothered Sirius. Remus appears to be staunchly trying to ignore them both, nose in a book, a cup of tea in his free hand.

“All rules are made up Peter, you do know that don’t you? They aren’t naturally occurring phenomena. Some bloke somewhere just decided that this was how things we’re gonna be. Well, I’m also some bloke and I decide that things should go differently.”

“That’s—that’s not how games work!”

“That’s not how anything works,” Remus adds flatly, not looking up from his book.

But Sirius doesn’t appear bothered by either of these remarks, shrugging his shoulders, a lazy grin hanging from his mouth. “Maybe not for you lot. But it’s certainly how it works for me.”

James can’t help snorting, bringing both Peter and Sirius’s attention towards them, Remus, of course, doesn’t look up from his book.

Well, at least not until Peter says: “Lily?”

“Lily?” Remus repeats.

Sirius is already out of his seat, Lily meeting him halfway, the two embracing—Sirius even lifts her a little bit off the ground. “Hey beautiful,” he says gently, the address lacking its

usual cheekiness.

“Hey,” she says softly, pulling back but not too far, just enough to look at him. “How’re you doing? I’ve been thinking about you.”

Sirius smirks but it doesn’t quite reach his eyes. “What? About little old me?” and when Lily doesn’t let go; “I’m alright Evans. You know...what about you?”

Her mouth twitches. “You know.” That makes Sirius laugh.

“Hey,” Remus comes up beside James, pulling his attention away from the other couple. “Do you want us to get out of here?” he asks in a quiet voice.

James looks back at Lily, her and Sirius speaking in low tones he can’t quite make out. He realizes he’s a little jealous, though he isn’t exactly sure of who. After a moment he shakes his head.

“No, Lily said she wanted you to stay,” and when Remus looks skeptical; “I want you to stay too.”

It's hard to explain, how it feels to have them here. His boys. Together. How much he needs it. How much it’s holding him together right now. He wonders if they feel the same. None of them have questioned it, the way they’ve all just started living together. Peter still goes to work, Sirius occasionally called away on Order business—James hasn’t been asked to do anything recently, and he suspects that’s Frank’s doing—but none of them have even hinted that they need to go home. And he’s grateful.

“What do you say Wormtail?” Sirius's voice pulls James out of his thoughts. “You ready for that game of Exploding Snap?”

“Best two out of three?” Peter asks as he gets out of his seat.

“You’re on.”

“I call playing the winner!” Lily sings, Sirius herding her towards the living room. She meets James’s eye on her way out and he thinks he sees her smile grow a little tight. He tries not to let it get to him.

“Hey,” Remus nudges him after the others have left, Pete and Sirius arguing about who draws first as they shuffle down the hall. “You alright?”

James tries to smile. “Sure.”

Remus gives him a skeptical look but all James can do is shrug.

“She came back,” he says finally. “I don’t think I can ask for more than that right now.”

Remus reaches out, squeezing his arm.

“Oi!” Peter’s voice carries from the living room. “What do you think you’re doing!”

“Shuffling,” Sirius responds.

“The hell you are, I don’t fucking trust you—give me those, I’m shuffling.”

“Well who says I trust you?”

“Boys, boys,” Lily cuts in. “I’ll shuffle.”

Remus gives James a small smile, “C’mon,” he says, nodding his head towards the front of the house. “Let’s go make sure they don’t kill each other, yeah?”

“Just like old times isn’t it?” James says, doing his best to ignore the ache in his chest.

The desire to go back and do it all differently.

In the end Peter beats Sirius.

And Lily beats Peter.

And Remus.

By which point they’re all half-asleep. Too tired to even make it upstairs. Carpets and sofas are transfigured into mattresses until eventually the whole living room is nothing but beds and blankets. Peter is snoring before James has even flicked off the lights, Sirius and Remus lying close to one another, James and Lily on either side of them. For a brief moment their eyes meet.

Good night

Lily mouths, making James’s breath hitch. He resists the urge to crawl over to her.

Good night

He eventually mouths back.

It takes him a while to fall asleep.

“I just don’t understand why we can’t help,” Sirius says the next morning, unable to keep an entirely straight face as him and James tease Remus who is currently attempting to make them breakfast.

“Yeah, me and Padfoot are well good cooks,” James adds from his place on the counter, feet banging into the cupboards below. Peter is slumped over the table still half-asleep, Lily on the

otherside of Remus chopping fruit.

“Lily gets to help,” Sirius point out petulantly.

“Yes well,” the pan Remus is standing over begins to sizzle, “that’s because I can trust Lily not to cut off her own fingers,” and then, with a significant look at Sirius, “or anyone else’s.”

Sirius lets out a dramatic gasp. “Prongs did you hear that?”

“Sure did, sounds like he’s questioning your knife skills.”

“An affront to my honour!”

Remus shakes his head, carefully pouring batter into the pan, tilting it gently this way and that until the whole surface area is covered. It’s honestly fascinating to watch.

“I’m French after all,” Sirius goes on.

“What does that have to do with anything?” Lily asks, popping a strawberry into her mouth. James tries not to notice the way the juices turn her lips red, looking down at his knuckles instead.

“Um, he’s making crêpes,” Sirius says. “The food of my people.”

“The food of your people,” Remus mutters, hip checking Sirius out of the way and sliding the newly made crêpe onto a plate with the rest of them before starting the whole process over again.

Sirius looks like he’s gearing up for a big speech when there’s tapping on the window. All of them turn to see the little brown owl waiting impatiently with the Prophet in its beak.

Remus gives Sirius another shove. “There, you want to be helpful? Go get the paper.”

“But I—“

“Go on, get!”

Rolling his eyes Sirius heads towards the window, muttering something like “my talents wasted” as he goes.

“Lily, did we remember the blackberries?” Remus asks, not taking his eyes off the pan in front of him.

“Uh—yeah, they must be around here somewhere,” she starts spinning about herself, eyes roaming over the chaos of groceries on the counter. James is pretty sure they bought out the whole supermarket.

“On your left.”

Her eyes flick up to his and for a moment the pair freezes. He can't tell anymore, if the electricity between them is a good thing or a bad thing.

James clears his throat. "The blackberries. They're on your left," he points with his finger.

Lily blinks. "Oh," she pushes a few things aside to get to them, "...thanks."

James is about to say "you're welcome" or something equally stiff and boring, when Peter interrupts:

"Sirius are you okay?"

They all turn their heads, even Remus, who had previously been very reluctant to look away from his crêpes. Sirius is standing at the window, newspaper in hand, owl long gone, just staring at the front page.

"Sirius?" James asks, slipping off the counter, but it's Remus who walks across the room towards him, Lily waving her wand to turn the heat off the food before it burns.

Sirius doesn't look up or give any indication that he's heard anything, just keeps standing there, completely frozen. James feels something heavy forming in the pit of his stomach.

"Sirius?" Remus asks again, now at his side, hand brushing against Sirius's lower back.

Sirius starts, lifting his head so that James can appreciate how pale he's gotten. "Shit, sorry, zoned out," he says in a falsely cheery voice, tossing the paper off to the side and walking back towards the food. "So, are we done? I'm fucking starving."

He grabs the plate of finished crêpes, flicking his wand so that the fruit follows him as he sits down at the table with a very startled looking Peter. Lily has to scramble to grab hold of the precariously placed knife on the cutting board now following Sirius across the room.

"Fuck this looks good," Sirius says, starting to somewhat manically fill his plate. "Well, go on Pete, dig in."

Peter looks surprised to have been acknowledged and then quickly turns to James with a clear "what do I do?" look on his face. James just nods, and so, warily, Peter starts to eat.

Remus has now taken Sirius's place, standing by the window, staring wide eyed at the front page of the paper.

"Moons?" James finally asks. Remus looks up, eyes drifting to Sirius and then back to James, who arches his brow in question.

"It's Orion," Remus says finally, voice strained as he turns the paper around so they can see the giant moving photo of Orion Black—surely taken several years ago at some Ministry function. He's dressed in fancy robes and grinning in a way that twists James's stomach—reminding him too much of Regulus. "He's dead."

That information really shouldn't be so shocking, considering the shape he'd been in the last time James saw him. But for some reason he still feels his heart catching.

"Shit," Peter looks across the table at Sirius who has not put down his fork, not lifted his head to look at anyone, eyes focused intently on his plate. Remus drops into the seat next to him, James and Lily still frozen in place. None of them really knowing what to say or do.

Sirius seems to swallow with some difficulty, letting the silence stretch on for a good long while before he finally speaks.

"Bad time to be a Black, huh?"

His laughter doesn't reach his eyes.

The boys stay for a few more days after that. Though no one talks about why, especially Sirius. He doesn't mention his father's name once and when anyone tries to bring it up he becomes intensely focused on some task or another—hoovering or looking through Lily's records or broom polishing. But eventually, they do have to leave.

"I'll come by a couple times after work maybe?" Peter says as he pulls away from a hug with Lily.

"That'd be nice Pete," she says, smiling.

"Thanks Wormtail," James wraps his arms around him. Peter was shorter than him when they were kids but they're practically the same height now, a fact James always forgets until moments like this. "For...you know."

He can feel Peter nod against his shoulder. "Of course."

It's a bit harder, letting Remus and Sirius go.

James isn't sure how long Sirius and him stand at the front door hugging one another. Probably an embarrassingly long time but he doubts either Lily or Remus are surprised.

"You can come back, if you need," James says, feeling Sirius nod.

"Yeah I know. Always welcome right?"

James squeezes him tighter. "I'll even make you your disgusting tea."

"Fuck off Potter."

James laughs, turning his head and kissing Sirius's temple, feeling the other boy sag into him a little more. "We can still be happy," he whispers.

This time it's Sirius who squeezes, before reluctantly pulling back. "I believe you," he gives James a half-hearted grin.

"I'll take care of him," Remus says, when it's his turn.

"Take care of you too, okay?"

Remus lets out a huff. "I'll try."

And then they're gone. Leaving James and Lily alone in an empty house.

Things are tense.

They don't...fight, but they don't...talk much either. James moves into Sirius's bedroom, starts going into the Ministry again, helping Frank train the Aurors in flying combat. Lily has her own jobs, though, of course, James has no idea what they are. So avoiding one another is fairly easy. And that is what they're doing, as much as James doesn't want to admit it.

For the first time James thinks he really understands the term "small talk" because every time they speak it all feels tiny. Little words, with little meanings.

Hi.

Good morning.

Nice out today.

We need more milk.

The smaller the words get the tighter his chest feels. Like he's shrinking himself, trying to take up less space, apologizing for being there. For being in her life. A form of penance. James Potter, the loudest and biggest and brightest, shoving himself in a corner. Because maybe if he hadn't been so loud and big and bright he would have been able to see beyond himself. Maybe he would have been able to stop everything from going so wrong.

Weeks pass.

A new year begins that no one seems particularly enthused about.

Time drags on.

James said he would fix this. Said they could still be happy.

He wants to make good on those promises, but sometimes the weight in his chest is too much. The grief. The loss. Sometimes he thinks he's mourning Lily as much as Regulus.

Then, one day, he comes home and finds her sitting at the kitchen table.

“Oh,” he stops in the doorway. “Hi.”

By and large the two of them have been spending very little time in common areas, both preferring to hide in their rooms.

She gives him a weak smile. “Hi,” and then, clearing her throat. “Sit?”

James’s heart drops into the pit of his stomach as he sinks into the seat across from her. He doesn’t like where this is going at all, knee bouncing nervously up and down under the table.

“James—“

“Look,” he cuts in, leaning forward. “I know I haven’t been doing this right, that I said I wanted you to come back so that we could try and then I’ve just been...staying out of your way.”

“James—“

“But it’s only because I don’t know how to—to start I guess? And I don’t want to push too hard. I want to give you time and space and, y’know,” he runs a frustrated hand through his hair. “But I’ve let this go on for too long and it probably feels like I’m not putting any effort in at all. But I swear I am—or, I want to be. I just—just need to figure out—“

“*James*,” she speaks loud enough to shut-up the spiralling thoughts in his head, causing his eyes to snap up and meet her’s. She doesn’t look angry, just a little exasperated, and if he’s feeling generous, there might even be some fondness there.

“This doesn’t all fall on you,” she says finally.

“I’m the one who fucked it up though.”

“Maybe, but I agreed to come back. Which means we’re both responsible for making this work. And I haven’t...haven’t exactly been pulling my weight either,” she chews on her bottom lip for a moment before confessing: “I think I’m scared, to be honest with you.”

James gives her a weak smile. “Yeah,” he croaks, “me too.”

“I’ve been talking to Alice,” she says eventually. “And she thinks it might be good for us to...see someone.”

James blinks, forehead scrunching in confusion. “See someone?”

Lily has started picking at her fingers the way she often does when she’s nervous. Chewing on her words before she says them. “Yeah, like a...you know, a Mind Healer.”

That word sits in the middle of the table. It’s big and obtrusive and James can’t see around it as much as he would like to.

“You think we need to go to therapy?” he doesn’t know why that idea bothers him so much, except that somehow it feels like admitting defeat. That he failed in some way. That the two

of them are...not strong enough to solve this themselves. His parents, after all, never needed to go to therapy.

Lily sighs. "I think...I think I don't know what I'm doing," she admits finally, looking up at him. "This...thing...between us, I don't know how to approach it. I don't know how to talk about it. It's too big."

"We can handle it," James says. "We can get past this, I know we can."

Lily looks at him sadly. "I hope so. But not on our own I don't think." And when James continues to stare at her, fighting his own internal battles, she eventually goes on. "Please," her voice is raw. "I think we need help. I need help."

I want to help. Let me.

But he swallows that thought, because despite all his inner protests, he knows she isn't wrong. Knows he's so far out of his depths right now that he can't tell which way is up or down.

"Okay."

"Okay?"

"Yeah," even though it kills him to say it. "Lets...find a Mind Healer."

The look of relief on her face almost makes it worth it.

Their Mind Healer is a woman in her fifties named Katherine—she insists they use her first name. She has large, thick, purple rimmed glasses, that hang on a chain around her neck, shockingly white hair for someone who isn't that old, and a tendency to wear very chunky and colourful jumpers.

She's nice.

Though James doesn't think she necessarily likes him very much. Not that she's ever rude but often, when he answers a question, she'll tilt her head to the side and give him a patronizing smile that suggests she doesn't quite believe him.

James doesn't think he's lying. Exactly. But he's maybe...not being completely open. Trying to find the answers to her questions that he thinks she wants. That he's supposed to have. He's pretty good at reading people, at figuring out what's expected of him, he always has been. Except that every time he thinks he has the right answer he gets one of those looks, and an increasingly frustrated noise from Lily.

Personally, James feels like therapy is not at all what it's cracked up to be. Sure, things were tense before, the pair of them tiptoeing around one another. But at least they weren't fighting.

Now though? Well...

"I don't understand why you're so pissed at me," James snaps. They've come home from their third session and Lily is stomping around the house, slamming cupboard doors.

"Because that was a colossal waste of our time, again!" she reaches for a bottle of beer and then, realizing the minute she has it in her hand that she can't actually drink it, glares viciously at it. Like it's just greatly offended her.

"Well I don't see why that's my fault," James shoots back. "You're the one who wanted to go to therapy not me!"

"To try to help us fix this," she slams the bottle so hard on the counter that James is honestly impressed it doesn't crack.

"Well it's not my fault it isn't working!"

"You're not even trying!"

Which James thinks is entirely unfair. "Yes I am!"

"Bullshit James, that's bullshit! You sit there like you're a politician giving fucking press releases!"

"What the fuck does that mean?" James's hands have curled into fists. Lily rolls her eyes which only infuriates him more. "No, really Lily, what the fuck does that mean? What the fuck do you want from me? You wanted to run away to Mary's—"

"Run away?"

"So I let you go—"

"Oh how fucking gracious of you."

"You wanted to go to therapy, I'm going to therapy. I'm sitting in a room with some lady that we don't even know and I'm—"

"Doing nothing!" Lily cuts him off. "You're doing nothing. You're giving nothing—therapy is work James. You have to be willing to do the work, to look at yourself, to be honest. I swear to god we sit in that room and I feel like we've gone back to being thirteen years old with you acting like some pompous dickhead."

James throws up his arms up in frustration. "I don't know what you're talking about!"

"You're putting on an act!" she shouts back. "You're putting on an act James, that's what I'm talking about and it's not goddamn helpful. It's the fucking reason we're here in the first place. You keep trying so hard to be this perfect person—this person you think people want and you end up hiding all this shit from everyone. It's not healthy and we can't—I can't do this if I don't even know who the fuck I'm doing it with."

Her face is flush, hair falling out of the bun at the back of her head.

“I mean, who are you James? Do you even know?”

That strikes a nerve, one that cuts right through him, hot and sharp. Which should maybe make him pause, make him take a deep breath. But James is too fired up to do anything but be on the defensive.

“That’s a stupid question—you’re being ridiculous.”

She shakes her head, running a hand over her face before pushing past him and heading for the door.

“Oh great, are you leaving again? Real helpful Lils! Go on then, go talk shit with Mary.”

“Fuck you Potter!” she shouts as he follows her into the front hall.

“Yeah fuck you right back!” he snaps, the door slamming in his face.

Before he can stop himself he drives his fist into the wood in front of him, leaving behind a dent. Pain vibrates from his knuckles all the way up to his elbow, the splintered wood scratching up his hand, leaving it red and dotted with blood, already starting to swell. He could fix it in a second but he doesn’t, preferring the ache to the emptiness he knows he’ll feel when it’s gone.

He does fix the door though, before grabbing his jacket and Apparating to Sirius and Remus’s flat. It’s a bit rude, admittedly, turning up unannounced, but he just can’t stand it. Being in that house. If they’re not home he’ll go to Pete’s. Or fucking Frank’s. Anywhere.

“Oh,” Remus says when he opens the door, blinking at James several times before stepping aside and gesturing him in. “Are you okay?”

James immediately starts to pace, hands running through his hair.

“Sorry, Sirius is out doing—well, I don’t actually know what, presumably something for the Or—James your hand!”

“It’s fine,” James mutters, still pacing.

“It’s *bleeding*.”

“It’s fine.”

“Uh-huh, okay, I’m going to need you to sit down,” Remus takes James firmly by the arm, and while he considers fighting him he ultimately allows himself to be dragged over to the sofa. Remus sits on the coffee table across from him, taking James’s hand gently in his, he looks at it for a moment before his concerned eyes flick up to James.

“Who did you punch?”

James looks away. "My front door."

Remus hums. "Well, I mean, it could certainly have been worse." He pulls out his wand, James hissing at the sting of his healing spells. "Oh come on you big baby, it doesn't hurt that bad," Remus nudges his foot good-naturedly.

"So," he lets James have his hand back, putting his wand down on the table, "you wanna tell me why you punched a door?"

James sits back, crossing his arms over his chest and glaring at the floor. "I'm losing at therapy," he says eventually, causing Remus's eyes to widen.

"Okay, jeez, lots to unpack there," he lets out a breath. "You're in therapy?"

"Lily thought it would be a good idea," he kicks at the table leg. "She was fucking wrong."

"Because you're losing at it?"

"Exactly."

Remus is quiet for a minute, watching James. "Has it occurred to you that therapy isn't something you win or lose?"

James scoffs. "No."

"Well, that might be your first problem."

"Oh there's more than one? Goody."

Remus smiles dryly. "Tell me James, how exactly does one win at therapy?"

James shifts his glare from the floor to his mate, who laughs, holding his hands up in surrender.

"Listen, you said it, I'm just asking. Cause honestly, I have no idea."

James grumbles, trying to figure out exactly what it is that stops him from being...a hundred percent honest in these sessions. That makes him recoil at the idea of telling Katherine exactly how he feels, exactly what he's done.

"You...I don't know, you show them that you're not...broken. That they can't fix you. That you can do it yourself." James stares resolutely out the window, not willing to look at Remus, not willing to admit that he knows how ridiculous that sounds. Eventually he sighs.

"You know, my parents? They never fought. Not once. They were never mean to one another, never hurt one another, they never did anything worth fighting about. They were just...disgustingly in love. I think it might have fucked me up a bit honestly, seeing two people love that perfectly," he blows out a breath, aware of Remus's eyes on him, of the way he's listening intently. Remus has always been a good listener.

“I want to be like that, you know? But it feels like the way that I love is just...all it does is make everyone’s lives harder. It’s too much. It’s too loud. Too overwhelming. I can’t seem to rein it in. I do it all wrong. I love people all wrong. Or something—fuck—ignore me, I’m talking rubbish,” he mutters, shaking his head.

Remus keeps watching him, long enough that James starts to fidget. “You don’t know what they didn’t tell you James,” he says gently. “You don’t know what their marriage was like behind closed doors. I don’t think—” he cuts himself off, biting his lower lip. “I mean, I’m no expert, but I don’t think anyone loves perfectly. Fuck, I don’t think anything that actually exists in real life is perfect.”

James frowns. “Maybe,” but he’s not sure he agrees.

There’s something sad in Remus’s eyes that James can’t stand, so he drops his gaze back down to the floor.

“You know,” Remus says. “It’s okay to be broken sometimes. After everything we’ve been through...I think we get to be a little broken.”

James doesn’t bother pointing out that he and Remus have not been through the same things. That Remus’s life has been, by any measurement, far more difficult.

“What if—“ he stops himself, taking a deep breath. “What if I can’t be me and be broken?”

Remus’s eyes widen but he still takes his time before he speaks. “What if that’s the only way you can be you?”

James huffs out a laugh. “Merlin, this is getting too fucking philosophical.”

Remus grins. “A bit yeah,” and then, more sincerely. “Needing therapy doesn’t mean you’ve lost James. Doesn’t mean you love any worse than anyone else. So just, y’know, maybe let your guard down a little yeah? It might actually help.”

James sighs, dropping his head back against the sofa. “Fine. I’ll...try.”

“Good boy.”

He rolls his eyes, kicking Remus who kicks him back.

“How’re you and Pads doing then? Things...better?”

Remus grimaces, tilting his head from side to side. “They’re...I don’t know. I get the feeling he’s holding himself back. Which...is fair I guess. No use getting comfortable with someone who’s constantly disappearing for weeks at a time. But...”

“You hate it?”

Remus laughs without much humour. “I fucking hate it. Makes me want to break things most days,” he lets out a weary breath, pinching the bridge of his nose. “I just keep thinking—when this war is over, we’ll be okay. We just have to make it out of this. We just have to

survive that long. Because I know we're meant to be together, I just fucking do. But not... like this. So if we can just hold our breath a little longer...except it's hard to see an end these days isn't it?"

He looks up at James who feels his chest grow tight. "Yeah."

"It feels like we're just gonna be trapped like this forever."

"That," James agrees, "or we'll, you know, die."

Remus lets out a startled laugh. "Fuck me, that's morbid. You really do need therapy."

"Oi!" James smacks Remus with one of the sofa pillows, which Remus promptly rips out of his hands and hits him back with.

When James gets home he can hear the sound of Lily's record player. He stands at the bottom of the stairs for a minute, taking a deep breath and trying to gather his courage. It's dark out, most of the lights in the house off, though as he climbs up to the second floor he can see the warm glow spilling out from under their bedroom door. Or, at least, what used to be their bedroom.

He knocks. "Can I come in?"

There's a pause, and he wonders if maybe she didn't hear him, but then:

"Yeah, you can come in."

Lily sounds almost as tired as James feels.

He finds her lying on her back on the floor, only the softest lamps in the room lit, giving the space an undeniably safe feeling. The song playing is by a Muggle band, James can't remember the name but he's heard them before. One of Lily's favourites.

Well, I've been afraid of changin'

'Cause I've built my life around you

The haunting voice fills the room, aching with nostalgia.

But time makes you bolder

Even children get older

And I'm getting older too

James forces his feet to move, walking over to Lily and lying next to her on the carpet. They're close but not touching, both staring up at the ceiling, the lyrics washing over them.

"You were right," James exhales. He feels her turn her head but keeps his own eyes on the ceiling.

"I was right?" she repeats slowly.

James nods. "I've been—" he struggles for a moment, a part of him desperate not to give up this truth, this ugly insecurity, "trying to prove to myself—to you, to Katherine—that I don't need therapy. That we don't need therapy. And that isn't fair," he sighs, finally forcing himself to look at her. "I told you I would go, I told you I would try. I want to. I'm going to... be better. I promise."

She studies him for a moment, James unsure if the silence is a good thing or a bad thing until he feels her hand slipping into his. They touch so rarely these days that the contact sends electricity shooting through James's arm, his eyes dropping down to the place where they meet. Marvelling at them.

"Thank you," Lily says finally. And then; "I'm not just going to leave again you know," and when James looks at her confused; "I walked away today because I needed space. But I don't want you to worry that every time I'm upset now I'm just going to disappear for a few weeks. I made the decision to come back. So I'm here, a hundred percent. I'm not going anywhere okay?"

James finds himself squeezing her hand without even meaning to. "Okay," he whispers.

They don't talk too much after that, just listening to the music, lying beside one another. When James wakes up in the morning, the sun slipping through the window, and finds himself still on the floor, hand still wrapped up in Lily's, he can't help but think that this is the first time they've slept in the same room in months.

And something like hope starts to bloom in his chest.

PART IV LILY

Lily never thought much about being pregnant.

She thought a little about getting pregnant.

About giving birth.

About being a mum.

But the actual being pregnant bit she never spared much thought for. It isn't quite as exciting a daydream she supposes. It's only now that it's happening that she realizes what a mistake that was. That apparently there are lots of rules about being pregnant that everyone seems to know except her.

It's because all those people have mother's, whispers the cruel voice in the back of her head.

There are lists of things she can't eat or drink or do, and at least three potions she's never heard of that she's now drinking everyday. One of them is an anti-nausea potion and thank Merlin for that, because the term "morning sickness" is entirely inaccurate and, as far as Lily is concerned, far too cutesy for a condition that involves being hit with the overwhelming need to vomit at random moments throughout the day.

She feels completely ill-equipped to deal with being pregnant—this thing that is supposedly natural. Maybe that bodes poorly for her as a mother. Like if she had a proper maternal instinct she would know how to do all this already. Honestly, Lily has no idea. She never asked her mum what it was like being pregnant. She thought she would have more time.

At least she has Alice.

"This is it?" Lily asks warily as they stop outside a shop in Diagon Alley with painted pink bricks and white shutters. An enchanted baby doll is sitting on the sign laughing and giggling.

"Yup," Alice says, frowning slightly. "Bit...much, isn't it?"

"A bit, yeah."

"Do you want to turn around and go back to mine and eat crisps and gossip?"

Lily laughs. "Yes, but I should probably get like...a crib at least? I hear those are important."

"Mm," Alice agrees. "Alright then, lets give it a go shall we?" she smiles at Lily as she links their arms. "Maybe the inside won't be so..." she gestures at the giggling baby and Lily snorts.

Unfortunately, the inside very much is still so...

"Pink," Alice says, a little dumbfounded.

"And blue," Lily adds. It's like there's a wall dividing the store in two.

Alice walks over to a shelf with baby bottles made to look like tiny butterbeers and a onesie that says "Daddy's drinking buddy" on it. She scrunches her nose. "Really?"

On the other side of the aisle, there appears to be something with a tutu attached that says, in sparkling letters, “heartbreaker”.

Lily can feel her anxiety mounting as she looks around the store. Whatever this is—she hates it. But what does that mean? Shouldn’t she be excited to buy things for her baby? Isn’t that a whole thing? Why does she suddenly feel like she can’t breathe?

“Where did you get your stuff?” she asks Alice as they start cautiously making their way further into the store.

“Frank’s mum mostly,” she shrugs, squeezing some teddybears as they walk by who growl playfully at them. “She kept all his baby stuff so we’re basically set.”

“Oh,” Lily hadn’t even thought about that.

“I’m sure James will have a bunch of stuff, I can’t imagine his parents throwing out anything he ever touched honestly,” she smiles and Lily does her best to smile back, though she doesn’t think she quite manages it. Alice’s expression quickly dims. “Hey? What is it?”

Lily shakes her head, looking away for a minute, allowing her fingers to trail over a row of tiny baby towels they’re walking by. “I just—” she isn’t sure how to explain. “I really miss our flat.”

Alice looks at her, a slightly confused expression on her face. “Your flat?”

“I know it wasn’t anything special,” certainly nothing like the Potter’s cottage, “but it was... ours, you know? We went and saw it together, decided to rent it, filled it with all our crappy furniture and our tacky posters that didn’t even have frames. And it was, you know, a complete disaster of course. But every inch of that place was ours. The two of us. The life we were building together.”

She pauses, expecting Alice to speak, but she doesn’t. Somehow knowing Lily has more to say.

“Now we live in *his* house,” she goes on. “Surrounded by his stuff, his childhood, his family. We sleep in his room. And I’m just slotting myself in. Forcing myself into a space where I don’t even know if I belong—”

“Lily,” Alice says sadly, but she waves her off.

“Everything is his. But I want this baby to be ours, you know? I want to look at this kid and see myself too, and not just the next Potter heir,” she sighs. “Does that sound mad?”

Alice shakes her head. “No. Not at all.”

“Good, because I do feel a bit mad sometimes.” They come to a stop in some random aisle.

“Do you have any of your stuff you could use?” Alice asks. “Old baby stuff I mean?”

“Dunno.” She has vague memories of cleaning out her childhood home with Petunia after their mother died, but honestly it’s all such a blur. She can’t remember what they kept and what they threw away. “My sister would probably know.”

“You should ask her,” Alice says, not fully understanding how complicated that would actually be. “It might help for you to have some of your stuff around, you know? Some of your life?”

Lily makes a noncommittal noise, stepping a little too close to a shelf of pacifiers which all the sudden start making very suggestive sucking noises.

“Jesus,” Lily jumps back. “Literally what the fuck?!”

Alice is laughing and somewhere by the cash Lily swears she hears someone muttering unhappily—no doubt the shop owner coming to tell them off.

“Okay, that’s it, can we get out of here?” she grabs hold of a still giggling Alice, dragging her towards the exit.

“Your face!”

“Yeah, yeah,” she pulls out of the aisle and almost runs right into a woman in what looks like an old candy striper outfit—pink pinafore, white collared shirt underneath. Clearly the shop owner.

“Oh, sorry,” Lily says startled, stumbling back as Alice attempts to get herself under control.

The woman surveys them with an unhappy expression. “Can I help you girls with anything?”

“Actually my friend was really interested in those pacifiers—ow,” Lily stomps on Alice’s foot, giving the shopkeeper a forced smile.

“No, nothing, thank you. I think we’re done looking.”

The woman doesn’t move at first, eyes running them up and down. “This is an adult store you know, the sweet shop is another block over.”

With that she sniffs, head held high as she steps out of their way. For a moment Lily is too thrown to move. Neither Alice nor her are really showing yet, they’ve put on some weight, but they’re wearing coats, and if you hadn’t known them before than you might not notice their bellies. It’s clear that when the shopkeeper looks at them she doesn’t see two expecting mothers. She sees children. The idea that they’re having babies probably seems ridiculous to her. Honestly, it seems a bit ridiculous to Lily too most days.

“C’mon Lily,” Alice takes the lead, pulling Lily towards the door and back out onto the street.

It’s snowing now, Alice tugging her hat down over her ears as Lily follows her along the road. She wonders what it’ll be like when everyone can tell—wonders if every time a stranger sees her in public the first thing they’ll think is “what kind of a girl gets herself in a

position like that?" She supposes she should have had these thoughts before it's just... everything's happened so fast. But now she can't help looking at the faces she passes. Can't help wondering what they think of her.

Can't help wondering what she thinks of her.

"That woman was such a cunt."

Lily is startled out of her spiral, unable to stop herself from laughing. "Alice!"

"What?" Alice asks, grabbing hold of Lily's arm as they keep walking down the street. "She was!" and then, casual as anything, as though nothing's happened—which Lily supposes, in the grand scheme of things, it hasn't—she goes on; "Lets go to the Leaky, yeah? I'm starving. Plus I really have to pee."

Lily laughs.

It takes her a few days, but eventually she does call Petunia. Asks to meet for lunch. Well, actually, she asks to come over but Petunia insists they eat out. Lily expects that has something to do with her not wanting Lily around Vernon. Considering what an unimpressive person he is, her sister is constantly afraid of somehow falling short of his standards.

It's been a long time since they've spoken, and Lily finds that she's nervous as she walks up to the small restaurant in a suburb just outside of London. Hands fiddling with her sleeves.

Petunia, of course, is early. So Lily gets to enjoy the distinctly uncomfortable sensation of feeling her sister's critical gaze on her as she is lead to the table by the hostess.

"Thanks," she says to the woman as she sits clumsily in her chair, a menu placed in front of her.

She always feels big and loud and awkward around Petunia, who is none of those things. If the word "dainty" was a person it would be Lily's sister.

"You made it," Petunia says flatly.

"Of course I made it," Lily tries to smile but it doesn't feel quite right on her face, and Petunia certainly doesn't return it, if anything she looks suspicious. "Well," Lily isn't sure why she sounds so out of breath or why her cheeks are so hot. "This place is nice. Have—er—you been here before?"

"Me and the girls come here for lunch every other Tuesday."

The "girls" is a group of women Petunia has been friends with since primary school. Lily has never much got on with them. To be honest, she's not entirely convinced that Petunia gets on with them either but they certainly...look the way that Petunia wants to. The way they dress

and the places they go and the families they come from. Lily is almost positive that's the only reason they're friends, because otherwise she can't think of a single thing they all have in common.

But then, it's not as though she knows much about her sister these days.

"Great," Lily manages, maintaining her false cheer. "Then you can tell me what's good."

Petunia gives her a long look before dropping her eyes down to the menu. "Their salads are lovely."

Lily does her best not to cringe.

In the end, she gets the chicken parmesan, because she likes it and can't ever seem to figure out how to make it right on her own—she's still looking for a spell. Petunia does, indeed, order a salad.

"So..." Lily starts awkwardly, once the waitress has left them.

Petunia arches her brow. "So?"

"How are you? How are things?"

Her brow does not lower. "Really? This is what you wanted to talk about?"

Lily shifts uncomfortably in her seat, suddenly worried she didn't dress well enough—it's not that this place is fancy but it's certainly nice, and she's only in a pair of stretchy black trousers and an oversized jumper.

"Isn't that what people ask each other?" she says hopefully.

Petunia's eyes narrow. "People, maybe. But not you. You never ask how I am. I've barely heard from you since we finished dealing with mum's stuff."

Lily winces, knowing it's true. "Well, it's not like you've called me either."

"You don't have a phone," Petunia points out flatly.

Right.

"Written me then."

Petunia stares at her. "And how would I send this letter exactly? By raven? Badger? Or is there some other creature you're using these days?"

Lily rolls her eyes. "You can send me letters using the Muggle post."

"Muggle," she repeats the word with intense dislike and Lily sighs, because she really should have known better than to say that.

“Okay, look, I’m sorry I haven’t...been around. Things are...” how to even explain. “A bit dangerous in my world right now.”

“Oh you have your own world do you? How nice.”

“Is that the only part of what I just said that you heard?”

Petunia glares. “Just eat your pasta Lily.” She herself makes an angry stab at the lettuce in front of her. Lily vehemently refuses to touch her food out of principal. She’s a grown-up after all and Petunia doesn’t get to tell her what to do. However, after a few minutes of Petunia ignoring her, and Lily’s stomach grumbling, she eventually gives in.

They eat in silence for the most part, Lily letting the tension simmer down as she tries to work up the courage to ask what she came here to ask.

“So,” she tries again, taking a gulp of her water, hands a little shaky when she sets it down, “do you know what happened to our baby stuff?”

Petunia stiffens. “Why?” she asks tightly, as she sits back, dabbing at the corners of her mouth with her napkin.

Lily is starting to feel a little too hot again, tugging at her collar. “Well I just can’t remember what we did with it when we cleaned out the house and—I mean, it would be nice to have, for, you know...our kids.”

Petunia keeps staring at her and Lily can feel herself shrinking under her hard gaze, the restaurant suddenly too full and too small, the clinking of cutlery making her wince.

“I have it,” Petunia finally says.

Lily blinks. “You...have it?”

“The baby stuff, yes, I have it.”

“Oh.” There’s something about the way that her sister says it, like a challenge, it’s not that that’s unusual for Petunia exactly, but Lily is getting the sense that this is something she’s going to have to ask for delicately. Petunia is never a fan of giving things to Lily, hasn’t been since the day Lily got her Hogwarts letter.

“That’s great,” she goes on, smiling again. “Would—I mean—would you mind if I took a look at it? Maybe took some of my things?”

“None of them are yours.”

That startles Lily. “Some of it must be.”

“No,” Petunia says pointedly. “Everything you had was mine first. So all of it, is technically, mine.”

Lily grits her teeth, doing her best not to lose her patience. “Okay, well, would you mind if I took some of it anyway?”

“Yes.”

“Yes?”

“Yes I would mind.”

“Why?” Lily demands. “It’s not like you’re using it.”

Petunia doesn’t say anything, and after a long uncomfortable moment of silence reaches for her water and takes a sip. Lily feels something itch in her chest.

“You’re not using it?” she repeats, getting the same blank stare. “Right?”

Petunia clears her throat. “I am actually.”

It takes several moments of stunned silence for Lily to process that statement. “You’re pregnant?” Her eyes go automatically to her sister’s stomach which is, of course, largely covered by the table. “How far along?”

“Almost five months now,” Petunia actually smiles when she says that, placing her hands on her belly and now Lily can see it—the roundness. Subtle, but there.

“That’s,” Lily swallows, not sure why this is making her emotional. “That’s really—that’s really great Tuni, I’m so happy for you, wow.”

Her sister looks up at her, beaming. *Actually* beaming. “So you see, I’m going to be needing the baby stuff.”

Something tugs in Lily’s chest, her nerves returning. This whole conversation is so surreal. It feels like barely anytime has passed between the two of them playing in the park at the end of the street and now. Sitting here. Both pregnant. Barely anytime. Or maybe lifetimes. It’s hard to tell which.

“Yeah of course,” Lily finally manages, voice a little rough. “But—um—but do you think there’s anyway we could share?”

Petunia’s expression instantly shutters. “Why?” she asks sharply, and then her eyes drop down to Lily’s stomach, which isn’t showing much, but enough that once it’s pointed out... Petunia’s gaze snaps back up. “You’re pregnant?” an accusation.

Lily gives her a wavering smile. “Surprise?”

For a second it feels like Petunia stops moving completely, frozen in place, and then: “You got married?”

Does she sound hurt?

“No,” Lily falters. “Er—no—it wasn’t exactly planned.”

“Jesus Christ Lily. With who?”

“My boyfriend, who do you think?” she bristles. “You met him at the funeral.”

Petunia makes a face. “The one with the horrible hair?”

Lily barely refrains from pointing out that Petunia is hardly in a position to be disparaging the looks of anyone’s significant other.

“Yes, that’s the one,” she says tightly. “So I was hoping that—“

“Hoping that what?” Petunia demands. “Hoping you could swoop in and steal the spotlight?”

“The spotlight?”

“Just take whatever you want and disappear back into your own little world, leaving the rest of us behind without a second thought?”

Lily makes a frustrated noise. “That isn’t fair.”

“Isn’t it?”

“No,” she runs a flustered hand through her hair. “I think about you—“ Petunia scoffs. “I do! But you don’t want me here Tuni, you’ve made that abundantly clear, so what do you want me to do? Just come around every few weeks and let you use me as some sort of punching bag?”

Petunia shakes her head. “Forget it.”

But Lily can’t. She leans forward, halfway across the table, trying to get closer to her sister. “I miss them too.”

“Shut up.”

“And I’m sorry I wasn’t there when dad died, and I’m sorry you had to take on so much of the work when Mum got ill.”

“I said shut up,” Petunia’s voice quivers.

“But I swear I tried! I did my best. I was just a kid—“

“And what was I?” Petunia doesn’t shout exactly, but her voice certainly raises enough to get the attention of the surrounding tables. Lily couldn’t care less but she instantly sees her sister’s shoulders pull back, her chin lifting.

“Petunia—“

“This conversation is finished,” she fishes around in her purse before pulling out her wallet and dropping a few bills on the table. “That ought to cover lunch,” she says as she rises to her

feet.

“Tuni—” Lily feels very small all of the sudden. And very young. And very very alone.

Her sister fixes her with a cold look. “Don’t call me again.”

Lily watches Petunia walk away.

The last words her sister will ever say to her ringing in her ears.

Lily doesn’t go home.

Isn’t sure she quite knows where that is anymore.

She ends up sitting in front of her mum’s grave. She was always going to visit, of course. But somehow visiting has turned into hours of sitting, talking, thinking. This, Lily realizes, is the closest thing she has to an anchor. To her childhood. To belonging. Her eyes trace over the words carved in front of her for the dozenth time, finding no more comfort in them now than before.

She lets out a shaky breath, closing her eyes. “I don’t know what to do,” she whispers, even that feeling loud in the empty space around her, the sky overhead turning navy blue as evening creeps in. “Mum I don’t know what to do. I really need you to tell me.” She snuffles, wiping at her face. “Am I making a mistake?” she laughs wetly. “Have I made any choices recently that aren’t mistakes?”

Lily can feel the cold biting at her cheeks, she needs to refresh her warming charm but she doesn’t reach for her wand. Listening instead to the sound of the wind, to the distant noise of traffic a little further off. Listening for her mum.

“Hey,” comes a quiet voice behind her.

Lily jumps, eyes flying open as she turns around to find James standing on the path a few feet away, looking a little sheepish in the lamp light.

“Hi,” she blinks. “Er—what are you doing here?” It’s then that she sees the flowers in his hands—yellow daffodils, her mother’s favourite. “You remembered,” she says, before he can answer.

James looks confused for a moment before he follows Lily’s gaze. “Oh—yeah. Yeah well, we were getting them a lot once she was in the hospital and I—I mean I know we can conjure them but it feels better when they’re real. Anyway, sorry, I’m babbling.”

He hasn’t moved, hasn’t left the path, like he’s waiting to be dismissed.

“What are you doing here?” she asks again.

“Well,” James rubs nervously at the back of his neck. “You said you were having lunch with your sister, but as long as I’ve known you you’ve never willingly spent more than an hour with her,” Lily snorts, even though, all things considered, it isn’t really funny. “So when you didn’t come home I figured you probably came here. And when you still didn’t come home I figured...maybe lunch was, y’know, hard. And maybe you might need some company?”

When all Lily does is stare back at him he quickly goes on.

“But I completely understand if you wanna just tell me to fuck off.”

She laughs a little, rubbing at her nose. “No,” she says finally. “No, it’s—thanks.”

James relaxes. “Of course.” But he still doesn’t move.

“Well?” Lily arches her brow. “Are you just gonna stand there or are you going to give her her flowers?” she nods towards the headstone.

“Right—yeah,” James starts forward, placing the bouquet gently at the base of the stone before sliding off his backpack and Jacket, transforming the latter into a blanket. “Here,” he says, and Lily gratefully slides onto the soft material.

“Thanks, I should have thought of that but...” she trails off and James only nods, sitting next to her, not needing her to explain. She notices the purposeful space he leaves between them. He’s been good at that, since she’s come back. Somehow knowing instinctually that intimacy—all intimacy honestly—would be hard after what happened. Letting her take the lead. Never initiating anything.

“What’s in the bag?” she asks finally.

“Huh?”

She nods at the backpack he dropped next to them.

“Oh!” James perks up. “Right, look at this,” he unzips it and pulls out a bottle, handing it over to Lily.

“Now this just seems cruel,” she says as she stares down at the beer.

“No, no, look!” he points to the label, and Lily squints through the darkness to see the small words printed at the bottom.

Alcohol free

She stares at it for a minute and then up at James’s hopeful face. “You...got me alcohol free beer?”

“I’m gonna get rid of the other stuff when we get home,” he says, grabbing his own bottle and twisting off the top. “You can’t drink, I can’t drink, only seems fair yeah?” he holds out his bottle and Lily taps her’s against it without even thinking. She watches with bemusement as he takes a sip.

“Any good?”

James seems to consider it. “Well, as you know, I have a very refined palate.”

Lily snorts. “Yes, very refined. What was it you and Sirius we’re eating the other day?”

“Pickle sandwiches.”

“That’s the one.”

“Like I said,” he shoots her a grin, “Refined palate.”

“Uh-huh, and what does your refined palate say about the non-alcoholic alcohol?”

James smacks his lips. “A good vintage—“

“Oh fuck off.”

“Hints of oak and cherry.”

“Forget I asked.”

He smiles holding his open bottle out to her. “It’s good, try it.” And even though she has her own she takes it.

“Well?” he asks, eyebrow arched as she hands it back.

Lily wobbles her head from side to side. “Not bad,” looking down at the bottle in her hands she sighs. “I can’t wait until I can get properly drunk again though.”

James laughs, the noise bouncing around them. “One day huh?” his eyes drop to her belly before looking away.

After a few moments of silence she lies back on the blanket, looking up at the sky as the stars start to fade slowly into view. It’s peaceful and she lets out a big breath, trying to release some of the stress and anxiety that’s been building up in her all day. It only takes a minute or so before James is lying down beside her.

“Do you remember,” she asks, still looking up at the sky, “that night I found you drunk in the back garden at Mary’s party?”

James snorts. “Yeah, bit fuzzy, but yeah.”

Lily pauses and then; “You were looking at the stars.”

She can feel the slight shift in him. The tensing.

“Yeah,” he says finally.

Lily brings her hand up, rubbing her sternum, trying to ease some of the pressure building in her chest. “I thought it was Sirius who’d told you about them. But you said it wasn’t,” she swallows with difficulty. “It was him, wasn’t it?”

James stays silent for a minute and then: “Yeah, it was him.”

She already knew the answer so she doesn’t know why it still feels so sharp. Her hands gripping the blanket underneath her, eyes squeezing shut. She feels embarrassingly close to tears which she is blaming entirely on being pregnant.

“That night,” she manages, when she can finally trust her voice not to wobble, “you told me I was a force,” she feels James turn his head towards her but doesn’t look. “That that was what you liked about me, not that I was beautiful, but that I was...god what did you say again? — a storm.” She laughs a little wetly. “That,” her voice thicker than she would like it to be. “That meant a lot to me.”

“Lily,” he says softly, but she shakes her head.

“Now when I look back it’s like—he was always there, you know? In all these moments that I thought were about us, there was this other person there and I didn’t even know it.”

Silence follows those words, of course. Lily doesn’t even know what she expects him to say. But she can practically feel him thinking next to her.

“You know,” his voice a little wrecked when he finally does speak. “I think he kinda felt the same way about you.”

That’s enough to get Lily to open her eyes, to look at him. “What?”

“He always felt like you were the person I was supposed to be with. And I—“ James stops, chewing on his lower lip for a moment, brow furrowing. “I didn’t see it that way. Not once. But I never stopped having feelings for you. Even if I tried not to think about it. I’m not sure that there’s ever really been a moment, regardless of who I was with, that I didn’t want you both.”

Lily doesn’t need Veritaserum to know that James means that. Now it’s his turn to shut his eyes, face crumpling.

“God, I’m so sorry.”

“For what?” Lily asks.

James lets out a shaky exhale. “I never wanted either of you to feel that way.”

“What way?”

“Like you didn’t mean everything to me.”

Lily doesn't know why her breath catches in her chest. They're quiet for a moment. James still with his eyes closed, Lily's gaze running over the planes of his face; the bruises under his eyes, the small curls of dark hair at his temples, the smudges on his glasses.

"James?" she says finally.

"Yeah?"

She takes a breath, steeling herself. "I don't think Regulus was a very good person," because she has to say it, because she's worried that sometimes that gets lost. And it can't. It's important to her that it doesn't.

James's face grows sad again, and Merlin does it hurt, watching his lovely mouth turn down, his eyes squeezing themselves more tightly closed.

"No," James finally manages, "maybe he wasn't. But he really fucking wanted to be," when James's eyes open they're damp and Lily can't stop herself from reaching out and wiping the tears off his cheeks. "And that has to count for something right?"

She keeps her hand on his face, gentle, holding. "Yeah," she manages, even though she doesn't know if she believes it. "Yeah it counts for something."

They lie there for so long that Lily eventually falls asleep. Only partially waking up when James scoops her into his arms. She makes a sort of grumbling noise, not quite awake enough to form actual words.

"Shh," James says softly. "I'm just gonna Apparate us home okay?"

Lily hums, burying her face in his chest as she feels the familiar dizzying sensation of Apparation. She'd forgotten what it was like—being held by James. The warmth. The strength. She really does love him a horrible, horrible amount.

"Almost there," he whispers. Lily can feel him moving under her but she doesn't open her eyes. "Here you are," he gently lowers her down, Lily groaning and rolling over. She can hear the sound of James laughing softly.

"Let me get your boots off would you?"

She feels him take off her shoes and jacket, feels the blanket being pulled back and then wrapped around her. Everything is vague—impressions—disembodied noises and sensations that her brain doesn't quite process.

"Alright, good night you nutter," she feels him pull away and before she has time to think she's blinking her eyes open.

"James," her voice heavy with sleep.

“Well look at that, she speaks,” he says lightly, pausing in the doorway.

“Come back.”

There’s a beat.

“What?”

Lily pats the bed next to her. “Stay. Please?”

James hesitates, and even in the dark and her half-conscious state she can see the concern in his eyes. “Are you sure?”

“I’m tired James, not drunk.”

He laughs at that.

“I’m sure,” she tries to make her words as sturdy as possible. “Would you just—just come here?”

That seems to be enough for him, she watches through the shadows as he takes off his own clothes—jacket and boots falling to the ground before he crawls into bed, leaving space between them as he always does. Lily lets out a little huff before reaching over and arranging him how she wants him.

James laughs. “You’re the big spoon huh?”

“Always,” Lily yawns, burying her face between his shoulder blades.

Enough time passes that Lily is almost properly asleep again before she hears him whisper the words:

“I’ve missed you,” into the dark.

She wants to tell him that she’s missed him too but she’s too tired, so instead she just squeezes him really, really tight.

Gideon and Fabian are the first Order deaths that really hit Lily. All death is awful, of course. But she’d known Gideon and Fabian. Worked alongside them. Gone to the pub with them. Danced at Alice’s wedding with them. They were only a few years older than her.

And now they’re dead.

“Shit,” Sirius hisses under his breath as they watch the caskets being lowered into the ground.

“Yeah,” James says beside him.

It's wet and miserable and grey. Lily's stomach too big for her to do up her coat, which makes her feel ridiculous. Marlene shuffles over, taking her arm and placing her head on Lily's shoulder, sniffing.

"This is so fucked up."

Lily nods, watching as the family walks up one by one, dropping handfuls of soil into the graves. She sees Molly Weasley, her eyes red, ginger hair pulled back as she carries a baby and a handful of dirt, whispering something when she reaches the graves that Lily can't hear. Tears dripping down her face as she turns away.

Alice is one of the last people to walk up. She has none of the obvious signs of grief—face clean, robes orderly. But it's that stiffness, that formality, that gives her away. Alice who is usually so open and loose, today is cold and tightly held. An Auror through and through. She's one of the people who found their bodies—Gideon and Fabian. Sent after them when the brothers didn't return. They think it took quite a few Death Eaters to take them down, they certainly killed enough in the process. Moody talked at the service about how impressive that is.

But Lily doesn't think the Prewetts are much concerned with how impressive their sons were at the moment.

She reckons they would rather them have been mediocre and alive.

When Alice is done and the graves start to be filled in properly, she comes over to them. Mary is immediately at her side, arm around her back, and that's when Lily notices how pale Alice looks, like she's ready to collapse.

"Hello darlings," she says with a half-hearted smile.

"What do you need Alice?" Sirius asks, face as sober as Lily has ever seen it. Him and Remus look like they're leaning pretty heavily on one another. Each holding the other up.

Alice lets out a breath, her smile wobbling as she blinks the wetness out of her eyes. Lily wants to tell her it's okay to cry but she knows Alice. Knows how much she'd rather take care of everyone else than be taken care of herself.

"Will you lot come over then? For supper? Drinks?"

Frank isn't there. As Moody put it, he couldn't give everyone in the department the day off. Frank wasn't happy, but he also isn't one to go against a direct order.

"Yeah, 'course we will," James says, returning her smile. "Me and the boys will even cook. We make a mean beans on toast, isn't that right Moony?"

Remus rolls his eyes but Alice laughs. It isn't quite the noise it usually is.

"Yeah, no, we're getting takeaway," Mary says.

"I second that," Dorcas pipes up.

Sirius turns to her, mock indignation on his face as he clutches his chest. “Et tu, Brute?”

“Yeah okay, simmer down there Black.”

There’s a tension that runs under the conversation, threatening to crack the thin mask of normalcy they’re attempting to maintain. Each one of them looks delicate. Their brevity, their good humour, all breakable.

“Alright, well, lets say our goodbyes and head out of here yeah?” Alice leans a little bit more into Mary when she speaks.

There’s mumbled agreements, some of them filtering off towards the family, the rest drifting down the small slope towards the front gates. As Marlene peels off to walk down with Dorcas, James and Sirius talking quietly already ahead of them, Lily notices someone hanging back by the graves.

“You alright Pete?”

He doesn’t look up, staring intently at the fresh earth like he’s trying to work out some sort of riddle. The wind whistles through the tombstones around them, blowing Peter’s hair into his eyes—it’s grown longer recently, longer than Lily has ever seen it before. She resists the urge to reach over and brush it out of his face. It’s difficult not to want to take care of Peter. It always feels like he needs it more than the others. Like without a little help he might easily lose his way.

“If they hadn’t fought,” Peter says finally, still looking down at the graves, “they would still be alive.”

Lily blinks. “What do you mean?”

“Prewett, it’s an old pureblood family. If they hadn’t fought, Voldemort wouldn’t have killed them. They’d still be alive.”

Lily isn’t sure what to do with that. After a few moments of silence she finally manages to work some words into her mouth. “Yes, but then other people would be dead.”

Peter finally looks at her, brow furrowed. “What?”

“Somewhere out there, people are alive because Fabian and Gideon chose to fight.”

Peter considers this for a moment, before his eyes slide back to the graves in front of them. “I don’t know those other people,” he says finally. “But I knew Gideon and Fabian. Have since I was little,” Peter snuffles. “Gideon wanted to open a pet shop, he was wicked good with animals. And Fabian wanted to paint portraits,” his voice cracks and Lily reaches out, squeezing his arm.

“I wish they hadn’t fought,” he says finally, voice small. “I wish they were still alive.”

Lily doesn’t fault him for any of this. She knows well enough how careless grief can make you. Besides, who hasn’t wished something terrible at the deathbed of a loved one? Hasn’t

wished that it was anyone else there besides them. Someone else's mother or father or brother. *Let someone else feel this pain, anyone but me.*

"Come on," she says eventually, sliding her arm through his and linking them together. "Let's go join the others huh?"

Peter gives her a small smile, though it doesn't quite reach his eyes. "Yeah. Yeah alright."

It doesn't feel like they're trying to win a war anymore.

It just feels like they're trying to survive one.

The difference is subtle maybe, but important. They don't talk much about defeating. Just don't die. That's the Order's new motto.

Don't die.

Don't die.

Don't die.

It's what they repeat over and over again the night Sirius shows up on their doorstep, Remus in his arms, bleeding. Unconscious.

"I can't make it stop," Sirius is pale, teeth chattering as James pulls him inside. "He just showed up like this and I tried everything but I can't make it stop—I can't make it stop—I can't—"

"Okay Pads, it's okay," James says calmly, even though his eyes are full of fear.

"The kitchen," Lily's already moving down the hall. "Put him on the table."

The boys follow behind her, Sirius shaking so badly Lily is surprised he hasn't dropped Remus. But when he lies him down he does it with so much care you'd think Remus was made of glass.

Lily quickly steps forward. Remus's shirt is covered in blood but it isn't ripped. No entry point—no place where he was stabbed or shot or clawed. She waves her wand and his shirt is gone, revealing a clean gash cutting him open from his hip to his ribs. For a moment Lily is struck dumb by it, by seeing Remus revealed in this way. Peeled open like fruit.

"Fuck," Sirius sobs behind her, bringing her back to the present.

"You tried Episkey? Ferula?"

"Yes."

“Dittany?”

“Yes—fuck, I tried all of that shit James.”

“Okay, okay sorry I just—“

“It’s a cursed wound,” Lily cuts them off, eyes trailing around the smooth edges of the gash. “Like the one Frank had after your fight with the Bulgarians, you remember?”

“Shit.”

“What do we do?” Sirius steps forward, eyes pleading, panicked. Lily doesn’t think she’s ever seen him look so young.

“I’ll have to brew a potion, and you,” she summons a towel from the cupboard and presses it into Sirius’s hands. “Are going to hold this against the wound. It needs pressure to slow down the blood flow.” Sirius is already moving to Remus’s side.

Lily turns to James. “Get me my cauldron and the potions book in your father’s study—the green one with the purple spine.”

James nods, hand pressing reassuringly to her lower back before he goes. Lily quickly starts rummaging through the cabinets and drawers, pulling out ingredients—anything she thinks she might need.

“Don’t die okay?” whispers a small voice behind her. “Don’t die Rem. I don’t want any of this without you. So just—please don’t die.”

They say it too, when James and Marlene disappear for days, Moody unwilling to tell them where they are or what they're doing or when they'll be home.

Don't die.

Don't die.

Don't die.

“He’ll come back Lils,” Sirius reassures her. “He always comes back.”

Don't die.

Don't die.

Please don't die.

Or when Lily wakes up one morning with blood in her knickers. Hands clutching her belly.

Don't die.

Don't die.

Don't die.

“There, you see it?” the Healer asks, smiling with her wand held over Lily’s stomach, the blurry image of a baby projected in front of them. “Strong heartbeat and everything. It was just a scare, probably caused by stress.”

Lily still isn’t breathing properly, eyes unable to look away from the image in front of her.

“God he’s getting big,” James whispers, their hands twinning together.

“Sure is,” the Healer smiles. “Looks like you’re gonna have a very hearty baby.”

Lily feels something tug on her chest. “You’re sure he’s okay though? Positive? There aren’t any other tests you need to run?”

The woman gives her a patient look. “We’ve done a full workup on the pair of you, you’re both in perfect health.”

Lily nods, trying to get herself to relax. To believe her. “Okay. Thank you.”

“Of course,” the woman’s eyes bounce between Lily and James before she says; “I’ll leave the three of you alone for a minute shall I?”

Lily gives her a small smile, eyes going back to the projection of her baby. James collapses into the chair next to her, dropping his forehead onto Lily’s shoulder and letting out a heavy sigh.

“Lets not do this again, yeah?”

Lily can’t help but laugh, though it ends up sounding a bit more like a sob, causing James’s head to pop up.

“Oh hey,” he says softly, running a comfortingly hand through her hair. “It’s okay. He’s okay. Everything is fine.”

“I know,” she hiccups. “I really do. I was just worried there for a moment that—“ her voice cuts out.

“I know,” James says, squeezing her hand. “But look at him,” he nods towards the image. “You’re taking such good care of him. He’s going to be okay.”

I don't know what I'm doing, she almost says.

What if I'm screwing it up?

What if I never get better?

What if I always feel this scared?

She doesn't say any of that, of course. Instead what comes out of her is; "How can you love someone you've never met this much?" which in the end is maybe the same thing.

James just shrugs. "Because he's ours," as though that explains everything.

"Ours," Lily repeats, looking back down at her belly, free hand resting protectively on top.

Don't die.

Don't die.

Don't die.

Sometimes, Lily will catch James staring off into space, eyes out of focus, expression sober. Sometimes she'll catch sight of a little red ball passing back and forth between his hands.

She's never sure whose heart is breaking more in those moments.

It's a month after the hospital visit that Lily is reading in the living room when a glowing white stallion bursts through the front door.

"Shit," she drops her book, hand clutching at her chest as the Patronus gallops into the centre of the room.

"Lily?" comes James's worried voice from upstairs.

She's about to answer but the horse speaks first;

"Alice has had the baby," Frank's voice fills the room, Lily can hear James coming down the stairs. "It happened fast, don't ask me how she managed that, but—yeah—he—I have a son," Lily can practically hear the smile in Frank's voice and she feels her eyes filling with tears because being pregnant makes her cry at everything. Not that she minds much this time.

"His name's Neville," Frank is saying as James comes into the room, eyes going wide at the sight of the horse. "He's healthy—they're both healthy, both beautiful," Lily thinks maybe she isn't the only one getting weepy over this. "Okay, okay, I have to go," Frank laughs.

“Alice wants you to come see him though—tomorrow? Everyone will be here I expect. A proper Birthday party. Okay, okay, I really do have to go. See you soon though.”

The horse shakes his mane before dissolving into mist, leaving James and Lily staring at one another across the room, Lily sniffing and wiping her eyes.

“They had their baby?” James asks.

Lily nods. “Merlin he sounded so happy,” laughing a little. “I haven’t heard Frank that excited about anything since Quidditch.”

James smiles as he sits down next to her on the sofa. “Surprised he didn’t name the kid Quaffle honestly.”

“Alice would never let him.”

“Don’t underestimate Alice. She’s been known to go off the rails every once and a while.”

Lily looks over at him, eyebrow raised. “Really?”

“What? It’s a compliment. Honestly, I don’t think Sirius has ever actually been on the rails.”

Lily laughs again, shaking her head and leaning into him. “You’re ridiculous.”

For some reason that makes James stiffen. Lily tries to move away but he quickly wraps his arm around her, pulling her back against him. She can feel him forcing himself to relax—breaths controlled, like he’s trying to calm himself down. She wonders what she could have possibly said to set him off. And she has no idea how to ask without making it worse.

“We don’t have a name,” James says finally. It’s so not what Lily was expecting that it takes her a few minutes to really understand him.

“Oh,” she says when it finally hits her. “Right, yeah...forgot about that.”

That makes James laugh, easing the tension out of his shoulders. “We could just call it baby?”

Lily snorts. “No we absolutely could not.”

“What about kid? Kid is a great name!”

“Why do I feel like I’m going to have to explain to you the difference between naming and labeling? Also in what world is kid a great name?”

“Oh come on! ‘Hey kid! Over here kid! What’re you doing kid?’ rolls right off the tongue. Very catchy. Very versatile.”

Lily shakes her head, punching him lightly in the chest. “We need to come up with a proper name for him.”

“Ugh, proper, that sounds terrible.”

“Says *James Potter*, that’s the most proper English name I’ve ever heard.”

“Oh sorry *Lily Evans*, if only my parents had gone with something more adventurous like naming me after a flower.”

She pinches his side and he messes up her hair, the pair wrestling on the sofa until Lily eventually finds herself on top.

“Alright, alright, cease fire,” she pins his arms over his head, James’s bright eyes staring up at her, all earlier awkwardness forgotten. Before she can help herself she dips down and kisses his mouth. Quick. Chaste. Still, when she pulls back he smiles dopily at her.

“Our son needs a real name.”

“You’re very picky for someone who didn’t even remember naming was a thing until five minutes ago.”

Lily rolls her eyes, sitting back and blowing a strand of hair out of her face. “What about Fleamont?”

James pauses, expression growing serious as he straightens out his glasses.

“I’m not sure I’d...want that,” he says finally. “Fleamont will always be my dad, you know?”

Lily nods, because she does know. “I feel the same way about my father’s name,” she sighs, running a hand through her hair and looking out at the room. “I don’t want him to spend his whole life being compared to a ghost.”

“Yeah,” James agrees. “Yeah, totally.”

James’s stomach interrupts the moment with an absurdly loud growl.

“Oof, okay,” he gets off the sofa and offers Lily his hand. “I can’t think on an empty stomach. We can brainstorm names after we eat. You good with spaghetti?”

Lily smiles. “Yeah, alright. I’m gonna put on some music.”

James taps his nose. “Good thinking, that’s bound to give us tons of baby names,” Lily shakes her head as he starts walking towards the kitchen. “Oi! What’s that Muggle singer you like? The one who dances like a possessed scarecrow?”

Lily snorts. “Mick Jagger?”

“That’s the one!” James shouts from the other room. “Jagger’s not a bad name.”

“Absolutely not!”

“Why?! Who wouldn’t want to be friends with Jagger Potter!”

Lily rolls her eyes as she walks up to their bedroom. She never bothers moving the record player, not when she can just magic the sound into any room she wants it in. She bends over to start flipping through her albums when an ache radiates through her lower back.

“Ugh,” she pauses, hand resting on the wall as she breathes through it. She’s so big at this point that just walking up the stairs does her in. “Don’t take this the wrong way,” she whispers, looking down at her belly. “But you really suck sometimes.”

As if in response, she feels a small kick somewhere far too close to her bladder. “Cheeky,” she murmurs, reaching for her records again. She skips over the Stones, not wanting to encourage James, looking for something slower—Ella Fitzgerald or Peggy Lee or Otis Redding.

“Ah ha!” she pulls out her copy of *At Last!* accidentally grabbing the record behind it as well, which she proceeds to drop on the floor.

Lily groans. The floor has become enemy number one. Nothing is quite so bothersome these days as having to pick things up. She considers just leaving the record for James to get later but then it registers with her what it is.

“Oh,” she stops, staring at it for a moment before clumsily bending down and picking it up. It’s older and rougher looking than most of her collection. “Hello,” she runs her hand over the cover.

Lily very much believes in fate when it comes to music. That every once and a while a song plays at just the right time, in just the right place, for just the right people, because it was meant to. Because they needed to hear it. To mend hearts or break hearts or topple empires. Music, as far as she’s concerned, is the purest form of magic.

“What’s this one?” James asks when she comes into the kitchen, groaning when she sits down at the table. Her lower back is being a right little bastard. A gentle pulsing pain pushing against her spine.

“I don’t think I’ve heard it before,” James continues, waving his wand just in time to stop the pot of water from boiling over on the stovetop.

“It’s my dad’s, I got it when we were cleaning out my parents house,” she closes her eyes for a moment, listening to the song—the big band sound, the intricate trumpet. It reminds her so much of her childhood she can practically taste it.

“Sounds kind of sad,” James says, causing Lily to open her eyes. Her hand goes to her stomach, rubbing slow, comforting circles.

“It’s not. Actually, it’s rather happy.”

“Oh yeah?” James places the pasta in the water before turning to face her, leaning against the counter and giving her a look clearly meant to indicate that he’s listening. Ready for more.

“It’s supposed to be someone welcoming their lover home after the war. It’s about all the time they have now—to talk, to kiss, to be together. About how much they’ve missed one another, but the waiting is over. They’ve made it through. They can finally be together. Be happy,” her voice gets unnecessarily choked up at the end and she coughs, trying to hide it, unable to hold James’s stare.

It’s all any of them ever think about anymore—what it’ll be like, when the war is over. Honestly it feels pornographic, her daydreams of domesticity, of an average life. Lily blushes just thinking about it.

“My dad loved this song,” she pushes on when neither of them speaks. “He used to play it when he was in a good mood and force my mum to dance with him,” Lily smiles at the memories. “Or if she was busy sometimes he’d dance with me and Tuni, we’d stand on his feet, waltzing around like idiots.”

Lily remembers her and Petunia watching their parents dance. Remembers giggling and thinking how silly it was. What she wouldn’t give to go back. To watch them one more time.

James pushes off the counter and steps towards her, hand outstretched. She looks at the hand and then up at his smirking face.

“Dance with me,” he asks—well, asks might be a bit generous. There doesn’t sound like there’s much room for refusal. Lily still tries though.

“Don’t be ridiculous—James, I’m a whale, I can’t dance.”

“You’re perfect,” he says without missing a beat. “Dance with me.”

Despite everything they’ve been through, Lily still feels herself blush at that—the honest and sincere way he says it. She slips her hand into his and lets him pull her to her feet, the pair of them starting to sway. And yes, it feels a little silly, but it also feels very, very important. And Lily doesn’t know how to explain that.

“Who is it?” James asks eventually.

Lily blinks, lifting her head off his shoulder. “Who’s who?”

“Who’s the song by?”

“Oh,” it takes her a minute to drag the name out of her sleepy mind. “Harry James.”

He looks at her. “Harry James?”

“Yeah?”

Something comes over his face, it reminds her of being at Hogwarts, the way he would look right before he was about to pull some ridiculous stunt or just do something absurdly James Potter-like.

“Harry James,” he repeats again. “You know, my grandfather’s name was Harry.”

Lily has no idea where that's come from. "Was it?" but James is barely listening to her.

"Harry James," he keeps mumbling. "Has a nice ring to it, don't you think?" and then, cheeky grin on full display; "Harry James Potter."

There's a beat of silence. And then, for whatever reason, Lily finds herself laughing.

"What? Why is that funny?" James asks indignantly, the pair of them coming to a stop in the middle of the kitchen. "What problem could you possibly have with that name?"

Lily only shakes her head. "No, none. It's perfect."

"It—wait, really?"

She smiles, going up on her tiptoes so that she can reach his mouth. "Yes," she says against his lips. "A bit of me and a bit of you. I love it."

James kisses her back before smiling smugly. "Well, obviously, I came up with it."

Lily is about to quip back when a sharp pain shoots through her lower body. "Ah," she hisses, grabbing her back and hunching over. The joy is instantly wiped from James's face.

"Lily? Hey, are you alright?"

She gives him a tight smile. "Yeah," she exhales, James helping her sit back down. "Fine, just back pain, cramps."

"Should we go to St Mungo's? Do you need me to call a Healer?"

But she shakes her head, those are the last two things she wants. "No, really James, it's fine."

He kneels down in front of her, hands on her knees, looking at her with concern. "You're sure?"

She smiles again, this time a bit more reassuringly. "Positive," her eyes flick over his shoulder to the steaming pot behind him "Now go check on the pasta will you? I'm starving."

James waits for another minute before squeezing her knees and going back to the food. "You'll tell me if it gets worse yeah?"

"Of course," her hand is on her stomach again, making those slow circles. The last notes of the song floating through the room.

You'll never know how many dreams

*I've dreamed about you
Or just how empty they all seemed without you
So kiss me once, then kiss me twice
Then kiss me once again
It's been a long, long time*

She does not tell him when it gets worse.

Which it does.

She lies in bed and begs herself to go to sleep, hoping that after a few hours of unconsciousness it'll pass, but it's impossible to get comfortable when it feels like a rusty fish hook is being dragged through her lower intestines. Eventually, when she's sure James is asleep, she gets out of bed and starts pacing, hand on her lower back, breaths slow and controlled. In a way she goes into a bit of a trance, riding the waves of pain as they come. Breathing through them.

She doesn't let herself think about what this might be.

What it almost certainly is.

She just keeps telling herself that eventually it will stop.

It will pass.

Because she isn't ready.

I mean, yes, sure, she's ready to not be carrying a whole other life around with her everywhere she goes. But she isn't ready to be a mum. To have a baby. She just—she needs more time. Just a little more. She needs to be more in control. So it has to wait. The baby has to wait.

"Lily?" James murmurs, squinting up at her, barely awake.

"Sorry, just feeling a little restless," she smiles tightly, though she doubts he can see her in the dark. "Go back to sleep, I'll lie down in a minute."

Thankfully he does, his heavy eyes drifting closed again. A second later he's snoring. James doesn't believe that he snores, Lily's thought about recording him, playing it back for him,

but she never has.

She isn't sure how much time passes between one moment and the next. She can't look at the clock. Can't think about anything except breathing and not screaming. Or crying. Or doing anything else.

This will go away.

It always does.

"Lily?" this time James sits up, rubbing at his eyes, hair a mess. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," she whispers, as casually as she can. "Go back to sleep."

Much to her irritation James does not go back to sleep, but instead continues to sit there, knees bent under the blankets, watching her pace. If she thought she could, she would get back in bed just to put him at ease. But right now moving is the only thing keeping her sane.

"Is this the same pain from dinner?" James croaks.

Lily grimaces but doesn't answer. Doesn't want to. Breathing in and out, she demands that her body *stop. Stop this. We're not doing it. Not yet. Not yet. Please not yet.* She isn't ready. She doesn't know when she will be but she certainly isn't right now.

Along with the aching in her lower half something has started to claw desperately at her chest.

Panic.

She's panicking.

Somehow knowing that doesn't help.

"Lily, I think we need to go to the hospital," James says finally, yawning.

She shakes her head. "It's nothing."

"Lily."

"I'm not going to the hospital!" she snaps, stopping her pacing so she can glare at him. Unfortunately, her body chooses that moment to let loose a particularly brutal pain, the shocks of which rumble through her like thunder.

"Ah," she gasps, grabbing the wall for support.

"That's it," James gets out of bed, pulling open his dresser and searching for trousers. "We're going."

"I said no!" Lily hisses, teeth clenched.

"Something is clearly wrong—that or you're having the ba—"

“Shut up,” she’s frustratingly breathless, panting like she’s just run a mile, sweat dampening her hair. Her skin.

James looks at her, concern wafting off of him, trousers clutched in his hand. “What’s happening right now?”

She doesn’t have an answer for him. Doesn’t know how to tell him that she feels like she’s doing this on her own. That she’s felt alone since the day she watched him fall apart over someone else and suddenly realized that they weren’t on the same page about anything. The months of work they’ve done don’t feel like enough. Not now. Not in this moment.

But more than anything, she doesn’t know how to tell him that she’s scared.

Scared of being a mum.

Scared that they’ve made the wrong decision.

Scared of how much she loves him and how much that hurts sometimes.

So she doesn’t tell him any of that. Instead she waddles past him out of the room. “I’m not going to the hospital,” she snaps on her way.

“Lily—“

But she slams the bathroom door on him, locking it for good measure before kneeling down on the bathmat, hands clutching at the side of the tub as she tries to breathe. Tries to bargain with her body.

I’ll be so good if you just stop.

Stop please.

I’ll drink so much water.

I’ll get eight hours of sleep.

Just please, please, don’t do this.

I thought I could handle it but I can’t.

I can’t.

As the next sharp pain shoots through her she can’t hold back a shocked sob, heart hammering faster than she’s ever felt it go before. “I want my mum,” it’s not the first time she’s thought that. Not the first time she’s made that plea. Voice coming out small and weak. “I want my mum.” She was never meant to do this without her. She isn’t sure how she’s supposed to now.

There’s gentle knocking on the door. “Lily?” James asks softly.

Lily squeezes her eyes shut, tears slipping down her cheeks. “Please,” her voice is raw. “Please just go away.”

He could open the door, of course, a simple Alohomora would do the trick. But he doesn’t. She can feel him standing there on the other side. Feel the warmth of him even through the walls.

Eventually he sighs. “I don’t know what to do here Lils.”

She half-laughs, half-sobs. “Me either.”

He doesn’t say anything else, the pair of them lapsing into silence and eventually Lily drifts, consciousness fraying around the edges as her forehead presses to the cold porcelain tub.

She doesn’t know how long that period of time stretches on for. Of silence. Of stillness. Her grasp on time at the moment is, admittedly, fuzzy. But at some point there’s knocking on the door again. This time decidedly less gently.

“Alright babe, we’re gonna need you to open up.”

Lily lifts her head, blinking the blurriness out of her eyes. “Mary?”

“And Marlene!” Pipes up another voice.

“Dorcas is also here.”

Lily just stares at the door, fairly certain she’s hallucinating.

“Oi, Evans,” comes Mary’s voice again. “You alive?” she’s joking but there’s definitely an edge to her voice of genuine concern.

Lily coughs, clearing her throat. “Er—yeah—I—yeah.” She thinks about getting up to answer the door but can’t quite bring herself to move. “You can come in I just can’t—“ but she doesn’t even manage to finish her sentence before the door is springing open, Mary and Marlene coming in, Marlene wearing a pair of purple pyjama bottoms with tiny snitches all over them. Mary in sweats and a jumper and wearing her glasses—a rare sight. Dorcas is a little behind them, she gives Lily a soft smile that Lily returns shakily.

“Here,” Mary plops down on the floor beside her, handing Lily a water bottle. It’s not until she sees it that she realizes how thirsty she is.

“Thanks,” her hands shake as she gulps down the water while Mary reaches over to push some of the sweaty hair off her forehead. When she’s done she places the bottle down on the ground, wiping her mouth on the back of her hand and looking up at her friends.

“What’re you doing here?”

“Well,” Marlene is standing just over Mary. “James is kinda freaking out a bit.”

“Because you started having a baby and then locked yourself in the bathroom and refused to go to the hospital,” Mary says bluntly, somehow managing to startle a laugh out of Lily.

“Oh.”

“To be fair,” Dorcas says, leaning against the closed door. “I’d probably do the same.”

Marlene turns to her, bewildered expression on her face. “What? Why?” and then quickly; “No offence Lily.”

“None taken.”

“Because babies are scary,” Dorcas goes on. “I’d want to hide from it too.”

That makes Lily laugh again, though this time she winces, pain flaring up through her stomach. She grabs hold of Mary who doesn’t even flinch.

“You can’t hide from it,” Marlene goes on. “It’s literally inside you.”

“I can try,” Lily heaves, breathing through the pain.

Dorcas nods as though that makes perfect sense. “Exactly.”

“Mar,” Mary interrupts them as Lily’s fingernails dig into her arm. “You wanna wet one of those washcloths with cold water?”

“Yeah, of course.”

Lily hears the tap running, which is when she realizes that she’s closed her eyes. She opens them, finding Mary’s gaze intent on her. “Sorry,” Lily whispers, voice hoarse, but Mary only shakes her head.

“You have nothing to apologize for.”

Before Lily can speak Marlene is back with the washcloth. “Here,” Mary gently tilts Lily’s head forward, placing the cold cloth on the back of her neck. Lily lets out a heavy breath. “Feel good?”

She nods the best she can. “Yeah.”

Marlene comes up behind her, kneeling down and rubbing soothing circles into her lower back. Lily doesn’t know if she wants to laugh or cry. They stay like that for a while, no one talking, Lily breathing through the pain, until a loud bang erupts from downstairs.

Lily’s head pops up, the washcloth falling to the tile floor. “What the fuck—“

Mary rolls her eyes. “Dorcas, can you go tell those fucking idiots to please not blow the house up right now?”

Dorcas gives her a two fingered salut. “On it.”

“What the hell are they doing?” Marlene asks, collapsing against the wall across from the tub.

“Who knows.”

Lily’s eyes travel back and forth between the pair of them. “I’m sorry, who are we talking about?”

“The boys are here as well, though we figured it was best if they stayed downstairs,” Mary explains.

“The boys?”

“Remus, Sirius, Peter,” Marlene ticks them off on her fingers.

Lily stares at her. “They’re all here? Why?”

“Well, it’s like I said,” she goes on, looking a little apologetic. “James was kinda freaking out so I think he sort of—“

“Called everyone.”

“Jesus,” Lily runs a hand over her face.

“On the bright side,” Mary goes on. “At least now he has something to distract him so he’s not up here fretting.”

Lily laughs a little, dropping her forehead onto the tub and breathing out. “Merlin this is such a mess.”

“Nah, it’s not so bad,” Marlene says. “Though you are kind of stealing Alice’s thunder.”

Lily snorts and then grimaces, hand going to her stomach. “Stop making me laugh, it hurts.”

Mary’s hand finds the back of her neck and gives it a comforting squeeze just as the door opens again.

“The idiots have been wrangled,” Dorcas announces, a little breathlessly.

“You’re a star,” Lily hears Marlene say before the unmistakable sound of a well aimed kiss.

“So I’ve been told,” Dorcas murmurs.

There’s another few moments of stillness, where they let Lily breathe, Mary’s hand never leaving her neck.

“Here,” Mary says eventually, placing the water bottle back in her hands, “drink. ” Lily does, taking small sips, evening out her breathing, settling her stomach. “Someone want to go smash up some ice cubes for her to suck on?” Mary asks, hand gently rubbing up and down Lily’s back.

“We’re on it!” Marlene says, and Lily once again hears the sound of the door opening and closing. She slumps forward a little more, putting all her weight on the tub. Eventually she’s able to lift her head enough to look at Mary.

“How do you know what to do?” she asks weakly, ignoring the sparks of pain running through her stomach.

“I’m a wealth of knowledge,” Mary says dryly, causing Lily to give her a faint smile. “But in all honesty, I’m just doing what I used to do when my sister had the flu growing up.”

“Ah, of course,” Lily’s too tired to laugh. “Childbirth and the flu, practically the same.”

“That’s what I figured,” before her expression grows more sincere. “But my expertise is gonna run out when we get to the actual birthing portion of the night,” she pauses when Lily looks away. “We really need to get you to the hospital Lily.”

Lily winces even though she knows Mary’s right. “I’m scared.”

“Of going to the hospital?”

Among other things.

“Of making it real,” she whispers.

There’s a pause before Mary leans forward, laying her head down on the edge of the tub next to Lily’s, their noses nearly touching. “I hate to break it to you babe,” she whispers back, “but it’s already real.”

Lily closes her eyes and lets out a shuddering exhale. “I know.”

Another monstrous pain hits her and she groans, going up onto her knees. “Fuck,” she hisses. “Fuck, fuck, fuck.” Mary’s hand moves to her back, a comforting pressure between her shoulder blades.

Lily feels like every organ in her body is being squeezed—which, admittedly, is what is happening, so fair enough. But still. Bloody unbearable.

“It hurts so much.”

“I know, you’re doing beautifully.”

“I can’t—I can’t—I need something to fucking—” her voice breaks off in a moan.

“We need to get you to the hospital for that.”

Before Lily can force herself to speak again Marlene and Dorcas come bounding through the door—well, Marlene is bounding, Dorcas is walking at a very reasonable pace.

“Ice chips achieved!” Marlene holds out the small bowl proudly.

Mary doesn't take her eyes off Lily, brow raised in question. Lily doesn't need words to know what she's asking.

"Er—guys?" Marlene shakes the bowl of ice looking between the pair in confusion.

After a long pause Lily finally sighs, nodding her head.

"Forget the ice," Mary says, slipping her arm around Lily's waist as they both struggle to get her on her feet. "We're going to the hospital."

"I am thoroughly in favour of that plan," Dorcas says from the doorway.

"Okay, right," Marlene tosses the ice chips in the sink. "Operation get Lily to Mungo's," her eyes then flick down to Lily's sleep pants and something crosses her face. "Might wanna get you a new pair of trousers though Lils, looks like you might have—er—had an accident."

Lily blinks. "What?" she looks down only to find that she's wet herself. "Oh fuck me, really?"

"Don't worry about it," Dorcas says casually. "Mar peed herself after drinking too much at the pub like two weeks ago."

"Oi!" Marlene turns around and punches her in the arm. "You were supposed to take that to the grave!"

Dorcas rolls her eyes. "Please, you've done way more embarrassing stuff."

"I don't think you peed yourself," Mary cuts through the chatter, arm still wrapped around Lily, holding her up because standing is feeling extremely difficult at the moment. "I think your water broke."

Lily blinks. "What?"

"How long ago did this happen?" Mary asks, but Lily only shakes her head.

"I don't know, I was crouched over and I'm already sweaty and I didn't even notice honestly. I—"

But she curls over as another contraction slams into her. They're definitely getting worse and this is by far the most painful. "Ahh," she cries out, trembling.

"Fuck," she hears Mary hiss as she helps lower Lily back to the ground because that's where she's going whether she wants to or not. "There's no way we're getting her to the hospital like this, she's too far along."

Lily drops her head onto her chest. "Fuck, fuck, fuck."

"You mean she's having the baby here?" Marlene demands. "In the loo?"

Everything feels blurry from the pain—too loud and too bright—like Lily’s going to pass out, and all she can really focus on is breathing.

In.

Out.

In.

Out.

Her brain short circuits every time the contractions hit. Slashing through her stomach like a dull blade.

Mary takes a deep breath. “Okay, tell the boys to get us a Mediwizard—Floocall Mungo’s or go to the hospital and kidnap one for all I care.”

Marlene nods. “Yup. Got it!”

“Okay, Lils, lets get you out of these wet trousers alright?” Lily whimpers and Mary runs a soothing hand through her hair. “It’s going to be okay, I promise. We can absolutely do this.”

And somehow, when Mary says it, Lily almost believes her.

“Dorcas, can you help me get her up? Get these off?”

A second later Dorcas is at Lily’s side, her two friends helping her stand, Dorcas holding her steady while Mary pulls down her trousers.

“Here, maybe it’d be best if we got in the tub? More support and less...mess?” Lily steps into the tub without complaint, letting Dorcas lower her down as the pain dulls for just a moment.

“Fuck,” she sighs for the hundredth time. “Fuck this is mental.”

“It’s fine, right Dorcas?”

Dorcas smiles a little. “Totally fine.”

Lily shakes her head at the pair of them, eyes a little misty. “You lot are mental then.”

“Says the girl who started having a baby and decided to lock herself in the bathroom. Honestly Lily, and I thought I was the drama queen,” Mary gives her a wink.

“Oh fuck off,” she groans just as Marlene comes back into the room.

“Okay, okay, okay,” she doubles over, gripping her knees, out of breath from running up and down the stairs so much. “So they’re gonna go to the hospital and see if they can bring someone back with them but,” Marlene looks at Lily who feels like she’s barely keeping up. “James really wants to see you first.”

They all turn to her, making Lily squirm. She knows this should be an easy answer. An obvious one. But after a second she shakes her head. She's worried they'll ask her to explain but Marlene doesn't miss a beat.

"Got it, I'll tell them to get fucking going." And the next second she's gone again.

"I just," Lily says between breaths as Mary kneels next to the tub. "I just can't. Not right now, he—" she squeezes her eyes shut. "I love him. I love him. I want him here. But it's too hard right now. I can't."

Mary reaches out and takes her hand. "That is completely, one hundred percent, okay."

"Here," Dorcas comes over, crouching down with the previously abandoned ice chips. "Thought we might want these again."

Lily lets out something between a laugh and a hiccup. "Thank you," she takes some ice, before dropping her head back against the cold tiles and closing her eyes.

The pounding of feet up the stairs signals Marlene's return, speeding into the bathroom.

"Guess who I've found?" she says gleefully.

"Please say someone with a medical degree," Mary replies.

"I second that," Dorcas chimes in.

Marlene's smile doesn't shrink. "Nah better." Lily is vaguely aware of the noise of someone approaching behind Marlene, the pain building inside her again, making it difficult to focus. Marlene steps aside with a flourish revealing—

"Holy shit," Mary says at the same time that Lily cries; "Alice!" followed quickly by: "What the hell are you doing here? You just had a baby!"

Alice is dressed in a baggy t-shirt that must be Frank's and flannel pyjama bottoms. She looks tired but otherwise good. Eyes bright as they stare down at Lily.

"What am I doing here? What are you doing giving birth in a bathtub?"

Lily groans and then the contraction really hits her and it turns into more of a grunt, forcing her to curl forward over her stomach.

"Alright, okay, you're okay sweetheart, we've got you," Alice maneuvers her way through the bathroom until she's crawling into the tub by Lily's feet. "How far apart are the contractions?" she asks Mary.

"Not very."

"Not very? I'm gonna need something a little more precise than that Macdonald."

"Well I don't have anything more precise than that Longbottom."

Alice rolls her eyes. “Can someone please start timing these contractions?”

“On it!” Dorcas calls, pulling out her wand and transfiguring Lily’s toothbrush into a stopwatch.

Lily makes a small whimpering noise. “Fuck, fuck, what’re we going to do? What if something goes wrong?”

“Hey,” Alice says softly, squeezing Lily’s knees. “The boys have gone to get a Mediwizard okay? I promise you we have plenty of time before this baby comes, so you just need to stay calm and breathe. Nothing is going to go wrong. We’re all right here for whatever you need, okay?”

Lily closes her eyes, squeezing Mary’s hand and exhaling. “Okay.” And then she grimaces.

“Is that another contraction?” Alice asks.

“Yes,” Lily forces out through clenched teeth, opening her eyes to see Alice looking over her head at Dorcas.

“How long was that?”

Dorcas looks up from the watch. “Two minutes.”

“Huh,” Alice says, turning back to Lily.

“What?” she asks, voice strained as she tries to talk through the pain, surprised Mary hasn’t said a word since she’s definitely squeezing the shit out of her hand. “What’s wrong?”

Alice shakes her head quickly. “Nothing! Nothing’s wrong, just—uh—“ she gives Lily a bemused smile. “That baby might be coming a little sooner than I thought.”

PART V JAMES

James and Sirius have been asked to leave the hospital.

Well, that might not be entirely true.

James and Sirius have been escorted by security out of the building and are now anxiously pacing outside. At least, James is pacing, Sirius is more...leaning.

“—it’s not like we punched anyone!” James rails, indignantly throwing his arms around. “We were just telling them, calmly,” Sirius snorts but James ignores him, “to get their heads out of

their asses and help out my pregnant wife—“

“Girlfriend.”

“What?”

“Girlfriend,” Sirius corrects, bringing James up short. “You said—er—wife.”

“Oh,” James blinks a few times. “Oh well...” there’s a small awkward silence as James tries to figure out where the hell that mental slip came from. “You know what I meant.”

Sirius nods. “Yeah mate, I know.”

“And they bloody kicked us out!”

“Out of order.”

“Completely out of order!” James’s voice echoes a bit, bouncing off the courtyard they’re currently standing in.

“Moony will sort them out,” Sirius says, with an unshakeable level of confidence. “And, I’m gonna be honest, I was definitely about to punch at least one of them.”

James snorts, rubbing at his face. “Yeah,” he murmurs. “Yeah me too.” He lets out a heavy sigh, walking over to Sirius by the wall and sinking down to the ground. “I just want to be useful.”

Sirius nudges him with his foot. “I know.”

Another pause and then. “She didn’t want to see me.”

Sirius sighs, “I know.”

James shakes his head before dropping it back against the brick wall behind him. “Sometimes,” he starts, “I think it’s getting better, you know? That we’re...healing...and then other times...” I remember that I’m never going to see him again. Other times Lily walks into the room and won’t even look at me.

“It hasn’t really been that long, all things considered,” Sirius says eventually. “Maybe it’ll get easier?”

James scrubs at his face, “Yeah,” he croaks. He doesn’t know what time it is. He knows it’s light out—the sun hanging offensively bright in the sky above his head—but that could mean anything. Late morning? Early afternoon? All he knows is he’s been up for hours and it’s making his whole body feel heavy.

“There are good moments,” he finds himself saying, “like really good moments.” He thinks about last night, about dancing with Lily in the middle of their kitchen. “I just can’t figure out if that’s normal, you know? That those are just...moments. That there is so much in between.”

Sirius sighs, finally sinking down beside him. There's silence before he speaks. "You reckon it's just us?" he asks finally, both of them looking at each other. "Are we the problem? Or is this just...what it's like?"

"What it's like?" James asks.

Sirius waves his hand in the air. "Being a grown-up."

James thinks of his parents. Of Remus's parents. Of Sirius's. Finally he shakes his head. "I have no fucking clue."

Sirius lets out a huff. "Me either."

At that moment the front doors fly open and both of them jump to their feet, Remus and Peter walking towards them.

"I don't see a Mediwizard," James says warningly.

Remus shoots him an unimpressed look. "You know, as a general rule, if you want people to do something for you it's really best not to try and fight them."

"Unless they're being absolute bellends," Sirius says, which earns him an equally unimpressed look.

"We should have left you both behind."

"Remus, the Mediwizard?" James asks impatiently.

The other boy rolls his eyes. "They're backed up, they'll be able to send someone in a few hours."

"A few hours!" James demands.

"Two or three," Remus elaborates reluctantly.

"Oh absolutely not!" he starts towards the doors but Peter impedes his path, a rather apologetic look on his face as Remus grabs hold of Sirius who was following behind him.

"No, no, no," Remus says firmly. "You two go in there and it'll be ten hours before they bother to send anyone."

"She needs someone *now* not in three hours! Jesus Christ." James tries to move forward again, and again Peter blocks his path. He glares at him. "Pete, I love you, but if you don't get out of my way I will use force."

Peter grimaces but stays staunchly where he is. "Sorry Prongs, but Moony scares me more so..."

"James," Remus says wearily. "Please, I get it, you're stressed, but fighting everyone in that hospital is not going to fix anything."

“You don’t know that.”

“James.”

He sighs, running a hand through his hair. “Fuck—fine. FINE,” he turns to Remus who’s standing a few paces behind him, still holding onto Sirius’s arm. “So what do we do now?”

There’s something like pity in Remus’s eyes. “We go back and wait.”

James shakes his head, throwing his hands up in the air. “Great. That’s just fucking—fat lot of use I am.”

“James—“

But it’s too late. He’s already Apparating away, not interested in whatever placating statement Remus is about to make. He stalks up to his front door, listening to the distinct “pops” of his friend’s appearing behind him. The minute he steps inside he hears screaming. It stops him dead in his tracks. He’s never heard Lily’s voice sound like that before.

He feels Sirius come up beside him, and then Remus, Peter. They lean against him, letting him feel their weight, their presence, as he stands uselessly at the bottom of the stairs and listens to one of the people he loves most in the world in pain. Unable to do anything about it.

“This isn’t bad,” Remus says finally, voice quiet. “I know it sounds...but this isn’t bad.”

James nods numbly. He knows that, he supposes, but at the moment it’s hard to believe.

“C’mon,” Sirius nudges him into the sitting room, practically pushing him onto the sofa. “You want some tea?”

“I’ll make it,” Remus says, going quickly to the kitchen.

Sirius sits down next to James, the noises from upstairs still drifting through the floors. James rests his elbows on his knees, head in his hands. “I hate this,” he murmurs. He’s never been good at waiting. At being still. At doing nothing. He wants to fix things.

“Yeah,” Sirius says beside him. “I know.”

So they sit.

And they listen.

Hoping that any minute the wards will charm and the Mediwizard will appear.

Remus and Peter start playing a game of chess at some point, while Sirius stays glued to James’s side, even when Peter asks if he wants to play the winner. He presses into James, just

like he'd done at the door. Not talking, just a constant steady presence.

I'm here.

I'm here.

I'm here.

And then they hear running. James's head pops up just as Marlene skids into the room. Her hair has been thrown into a sloppy bun, strands escaping in all directions making her look a bit mad. And there's blood. Blood on her shirt.

"James," she says, and his heart lurches in his chest even after he registers the smile on her face. "Come, come, come."

"Is she alright?" James stumbles to his feet, Marlene already bounding out of the room like some kind of over energized rabbit.

"She's totally fine. They're both totally fine."

He's halfway up the stairs before he registers that. "Both?" his mouth feels dry. "You—the—the baby?"

"The baby," Marlene confirms, beaming at him over her shoulder. "Just wait until you—god James he's so—" but they've made it to the bathroom door now, it's wide open, the room inside an absolute mess. There are clothes and water and blood—fuck why is there so much blood?

Dorcas is sitting on the toilet lid, she smiles wearily at him as he walks in, Mary at the sink washing her hands, Alice kneeling down beside the tub and then—

James's brain freezes for a minute, pulling him up short in the middle of the room. The sudden movement—or lack thereof—seems to catch Alice's attention, because she looks up.

"Well look who it is," she smiles, sweaty and tired. "Sorry, I'm in your spot."

She moves out of the way, squeezing James's shoulder as she passes him. "I think maybe we all have something very urgent that we need to do downstairs right now at this second."

Mary snorts.

"Oh—yeah—that thing," Marlene grabs Dorcas's arm and starts hauling her towards the door.

"Jesus Mar," James can hear them distantly in the corridor, "dislocate my arm why don't you."

And suddenly it's just them.

James.

And Lily.

And—

“Look Harry,” Lily says, voice rough, “that’s your dad.”

James swallows as the baby—pink and blue and painfully beautiful—looks up at him. Giant green eyes and small slicked tufts of dark hair. For a moment he can’t breathe. Overwhelmed by it all.

“James?” Lily asks, the smallest hint of concern creeping in to her voice, which is when James realizes that he hasn’t said anything since he stepped into the room.

“Hi,” James sounds wrecked and Lily laughs a little.

“Hi.”

And suddenly he’s at her side, dropping down to his knees, kissing her temple.

“Oh don’t, I’m so gross,” her squirming makes the baby squirm, scrunching his little chubby face, and puckering his little chubby mouth.

“You’re so beautiful,” James says in a hushed voice, something prickling behind his eyes. “You’re both so beautiful. I—“

And he can’t.

He really can’t speak.

He just wants to gather them in his arms.

He just wants to hold them for the rest of his life.

“We did alright huh?” Lily asks.

James half-snorts half-sniffles. “Us? Please, this was all you,” his voice cracks as he greedily takes in the sight of their baby. Their son. He reaches out his hand, gently running his fingers along Harry’s little arms.

“He’s so perfect.”

“I know,” Lily whispers back. “I just want to squish him.”

That startles a laugh out of James. And then he’s leaning forward and pressing a kiss to the top of the baby’s head. “Hello Harry,” he says in the same gentle voice. “Hello, hi, hey, it’s so good to see you. I love you so much. I’m gonna love you so much.”

“Do you reckon it’s possible to love someone too much?” Lily asks, sniffing herself. “Because I think I might.”

James looks over at her. Cheeks flushed and eyes bright, hair plastered to her face with sweat. Before he can help himself he kisses her again—her cheek, her forehead, her nose.

“James,” she laughs.

When he pulls back their eyes fall into one another, catching each other, and holding, holding, holding.

“Marry me.”

The words are out of his mouth before he has time to think about them. And while he is, admittedly, a little startled by his own brashness, he doesn’t regret it. Not a bit.

Lily’s eyes go wide. “James—“

“I know we aren’t perfect,” he goes on. “I know we have so much still to work through. But can you honestly look at me and say that this isn’t forever? Because even in the worst moments, the hardest moments—the ones that burn and ache and sting—I feel forever when I look at you.”

They’re close enough that he can feel her breath hitch, so can the baby, who makes a slightly disgruntled gurgling noise.

“James,” she says again, like his name is the only thing her mind can wrap itself around.

“I love you,” he knows he’s crying. A complete and utter mess. He reaches forward, cradling her face in his hands. “It’s all I really want to do honestly. Love you. Love both of you.”

Lily lets out a wet laugh, as she turns her face to kiss his palm. “Yes.”

“Yes?”

“Yeah—yes, okay, it’s absolutely mental but yes,” she shakes her head, leaning forward to kiss his mouth. “I feel forever with you too,” she says against his lips. James wraps around her and Harry—who squirms again but miraculously does not start crying—burying his face in Lily’s neck.

“Alright?” Lily asks, turning her head to nuzzle his hair.

“Yeah,” James exhales, letting go of all the anxiety and fear he’s been holding since he woke up last night to find Lily out of bed. “I’m just really fucking happy you’re both okay.”

Lily hums, kissing the top of his head. “Me too.”

“Knock, knock,” Alice sings as she taps on the bedroom door sometime later, Sirius standing just behind her.

Lily and James are both on the bed, Lily under the covers, James on top of them, baby Harry asleep in his arms.

“Oh—whoops, sorry,” Alice’s voice instantly drops to a whisper as they come into the room. She goes to Lily’s side, stroking her hair. “You’re looking better.”

“Probably the shower,” Lily’s voice is heavy with exhaustion but she has a dopey smile on her face. “Well, that and the lack of blood.”

Alice snorts. “Personally, I thought you looked quite dashing covered in afterbirth.”

Lily makes a face. “Gross.”

Sirius hasn’t made it past the middle of the room, eyes on the baby in James’s arms, he looks like he’s been hit with a stunning spell.

“Well?” James asks softly. “You gonna come over and meet him or are you just going to stand there gawking?”

Sirius blinks, like he’s waking from a trance. “Right—yeah—‘course.”

He walks over to James’s side, unable to look anywhere but at the baby.

“This is Harry,” James says, smiling. He’s already obsessed with the feel of the warm body in his arms—his little breaths and snorts turning James’s heart to goo.

“He’s so…” there’s aw in Sirius’s voice. “He’s so small.”

“Oi! Give him a minute, he’s only just got here. He’ll grow. Least that’s what I’ve been told.”

Alice lets out a huff of laughter but Sirius’s face remains uncharacteristically sober. After a few more seconds of silence James starts to get a little worried.

“Sirius?”

Sirius swallows before looking up and James sees his eyes are wet. “Sorry,” he clears his throat, quickly blinking the moisture away. “I just—that’s your son, you know?”

James gives his friend a soft smile. “Yeah,” he says. “I know.”

“I’m gonna buy him so much shit.”

James almost forgets to be quiet then, biting his lip at the last second to hold back a full laugh, Harry fussing a little in his arms at the movement.

“Oh God,” Lily says, sounding more fond than horrified.

Sirius’s eyes go to her. “You did real good Evans.”

She smiles at him. “I did, didn’t I?” And for a moment they all just bask in it. The warmth and softness and love that seems to be bleeding out of every corner of the room.

“So,” Alice says eventually, “not that I don’t want to spend every waking moment with you and your lovely bundle of joy. But is there a reason you summoned us?” she waggles a finger between herself and Sirius. “Because I have to admit, I do feel a bit like I’ve been called to the Head Master’s office.”

Lily snorts. “As if you were ever called to the Head Master’s office.”

“She’s right, this is nothing like that,” Sirius adds. “You’re inner swot is showing Longbottom.”

Alice rolls her eyes. “Oh well, pardon me for not purposefully pissing off every Professor in the whole school.”

“Come now, it was hardly EVERY professor.”

James makes a skeptical noise.

“Pretty sure Slughorn was obsessed with us.”

“Likely a bit hacked-off we never went to his parties though.”

“Pfft, those weren’t parties. More like...meetings.”

“Work-dos.”

“Family obligations.”

“Alright,” Alice interrupts, turning to Lily. “I’m assuming there’s something you wanted to tell us?”

Lily smiles, biting her lip as she reaches out and takes Alice’s hand. “Yeah,” she says, before looking at Sirius. “We were wondering if you two would be willing to...”

“Be Harry’s God parents,” James finishes for her.

There’s a beat of silence.

And then Alice squeals, which has Lily laughing and sh-ing her at the same time.

“Sorry, sorry,” Alice says, hands clasped over her mouth as she does a little happy dance.

“Is that a yes?” Lily asks.

“Oh don’t be silly, of course it’s a yes!” throwing her arms around Lily and squeezing her unreasonably tight.

Sirius’s reaction is somewhat more subdued. His eyes going wide—threatening to fall out. “Me?” he asks James quietly.

“Yeah, of course you. Who else would it be?”

Sirius looks uncertain, it's an odd expression on him. "I dunno, Frank or Remus, they're..." but he doesn't seem to know how to finish that sentence.

James wants to reach out to him, but he settles for looking. "No," he says, as sincerely as he can manage. "You. I want it to be you. If, y'know, if you're willing?"

Sirius holds his gaze. "Of course," and then, after a moment. "I just met the little bugger but I'd die for him in a heartbeat."

James smiles. "I know you would."

The Mediwizard does come eventually, performing a few diagnostic spells and determining that everything is all right. He gives Lily some potions and salves to help with her recovery, though largely he just recommends she gets as much rest as she can. A bit difficult when everyone is crowding around them trying to get a better look at Harry.

"He looks a bit like a naked mole-rat doesn't he?"

"Merlin Peter."

Eventually James is convinced to put him down in his crib. The house slowly emptying out until it's just the three of them.

"James, come to bed," Lily half-laughs.

But he can't stop looking at Harry. Can't stand not being next to him. Touching him. "He's such a good baby," James coos. "He barely cried at all."

Lily snorts. "Yeah well, I'm sure that'll change in a few hours when he decides he's hungry."

James can't be mad at that, he wants to cry when he's hungry too. And there's nothing wrong with a little midnight snack.

"James," Lily hisses, though she can't keep the warmth out of her voice. "C'mere. You haven't slept in like twenty-four hours."

After a few more seconds James sighs, tearing himself away from the crib and crawling into bed with Lily. He slips his arm underneath her and she rests her head on his chest. He can already feel sleep pulling at him, even though five seconds ago he was more than willing to stay up all night watching Harry. But before he can completely drift away he finds himself speaking:

"You didn't want to see me."

"Hm?" Lily mumbles.

“When you were—when you were having the baby. You didn’t want to see me.”

There’s a pause and James thinks maybe Lily has fallen asleep.

“It’s still...work, to trust you sometimes,” she whispers into the dark room, James can feel the vibrations of her voice in his chest. “And I just...I couldn’t do that work then, I didn’t have it in me. Does that make sense?”

James closes his eyes briefly, trying to swallow the way that stings. “Yeah,” he says finally. “Yeah that makes sense.”

He feels Lily lift her head, so he opens his eyes, looking down at her. “It’s getting easier though,” she says, before leaning up and kissing his cheek. “I’m still glad it’s you.”

James’s breath stutters in his chest. “I’m glad it’s you too.”

Lily is still in bed when the knock on the door comes the next morning. James doesn’t think much of it. Pretty well everyone promised to come back and visit so he’s not exactly surprised. He doesn’t even bring his wand, walking to the front door in a t-shirt and his pants.

Dumbledore’s eyes sparkle when he opens the door.

“Oh,” James comes up short. “Er—hello?”

The older man gives him a tight smile. “Good morning James. I do hope you’ll pardon the intrusion, but I heard you had a son yesterday?”

James can feel the confusion pinching his face. “I—yeah I—are you here to see the baby?”

The way Dumbledore’s smile flickers makes something heavy fall into the pit of James’s stomach.

“Not quite,” the old man says eventually. “May I come in?”

The wedding is small. They have it in their back garden. Fireflies charmed to light up the sky above their heads like a blanket of stars. It’s the beginning of fall but it’s still warm.

Frank finds James before the ceremony, fidgeting with the collar of his robes in the bathroom mirror.

“Here, let me,” he says, batting James’s hands away. “You’re only making it worse.”

James sighs but doesn’t fight it, tilting his head back slightly to give Frank better access.

“How’re you holding up?” he asks.

“Fine.”

"Show off."

That makes James laugh. “Sorry. I’ll try to be more panicky.”

Frank only rolls his eyes, stepping back and admiring his work. “Well, at least now it doesn’t look like you’re trying to strangle yourself.”

James’s hand comes up, gently brushing over the fabric as he looks at himself in the mirror, a vague sense of longing pulling at his gut. In another life, he thinks, it would be his father here helping him get ready.

“They would have been so happy today,” Frank says, like he can read James’s mind.

He tries to smile. “Yeah,” his voice cracks.

“Who do you reckon would start crying first?”

James snorts. “Fleamont, easy.”

“Yeah, ‘course.”

James exhales, leaning forward and gripping the sink in front of him. Today is a good day. It is. But it’s also...hard.

“I didn’t expect to be missing so many people on my wedding day.”

Frank gives him a sympathetic look. “They’re here, I promise you. The people that matter are always here,” he gives James’s chest a gentle nudge, before his eyes trail around the room, up the walls, like he can see Effie and Fleamont in the wooden beams.

“I know that the wedding had to be here for other, less sentimental reasons, but it feels right. Feels like they’re still a part of it, you know?” Frank looks at James whose heart swells just a little too big for his chest.

“Yeah,” he manages to choke out. “Yeah it does.”

It had been a fight to get Dumbledore to let them have any kind of celebrations at all. Especially considering that, as of tomorrow, James and Lily will officially be in hiding. Luckily they had just about every Order member on their side and eventually Dumbledore caved. It would probably be safe, Dumbledore allowed, to have a small gathering at their home. So here they are, getting married. Saying goodbye.

“Oi!” Sirius’s voice comes hollering up the stairs. “You lot done making yourselves look pretty? We’ve got a wedding to get started!”

James and Frank share a look of joint exasperation.

“I hope Remus never proposes,” Frank says as they walk out of the bathroom. “Cause Black’s gonna be a nightmare of a bride.”

James laughs, getting to the top of the stairs before he feels his sleeves. “Shit—forgot my cufflinks.”

Frank looks up at him, a few steps below.

“Go ahead,” James waves him off already turning back for the bedroom. “I’ll be right there.”

“Better hurry or you’ll ruin Sirius’s special day!”

James shakes his head as he walks into the bedroom, hands going for the cufflinks sitting on top of his dresser. That should be the end of it. Over. Done. But for some reason James lingers. Before he can really think about what he’s doing his hand opens the top drawer, reaching inside, wrapping around the small wooden box at the back.

He opens it carefully, pulling out the Quaffle and sitting down on his bed. He feels the familiar ache he always does when it sits lifelessly in his palm. He rolls it around, watching the golden initials glinting in the light coming from the corridor.

“Do you feel betrayed?” he whispers to the ball. “Or do you understand?”

That it’s still love.

Always love.

He squeezes the ball tight before bringing it to his lips.

“I wish you were here,” which is an absurd thing to say, but he feels it all the same.

Because he wants to marry Lily. He just wishes Regulus was with him too. At his side. Smirking. Making sharp remarks about the guests as they arrive. Sneaking James soft smiles when he thinks no one is looking. Bickering with Sirius about the music. James closes his eyes for a moment and exhales. He knows that’s not how it would have been, even if Regulus was alive, even if he had come to Godric’s Hollow, it was never going to be like that.

But oh how James wants.

“PRONGS! Stop playing with your hair and get down here!”

James sighs. “I’M COMING YOU LUNATIC!”

He gets up, moving to put the Quaffle back in its box, but at the last minute his hand seems to take a detour. The ball ending up in the pocket of James’s robes instead.

It's a few hours later—after the ceremony, during which James cried more than Harry ever has, and dinner, during which several glasses of wine were consumed—that Sirius pulls James clumsily into the quiet of the house. None of the lights are on so they can only see one another by the warm glow that spills in from the back garden.

“I have something for you,” Sirius says, hand warm on the back of James’s neck. He’s surprisingly serious for someone who, only a moment ago, was doing the worm in the middle of the dance floor.

“Padfoot, I love you, but I’m taken,” James holds up his hand. “I’m maaarrrriieeedd.”

He should probably stop drinking.

“I had you first and Evans knows it,” Sirius says, causing James to snort as the pair of them stumble around. “But listen LISTEN this is important.”

James does his best to school his expression into something that says “I am listening” but judging by the look Sirius gives him he doesn’t do a very good job. Sirius squeezes the back of James’s neck before bringing their foreheads together.

“I’m here.”

“I know that.”

“No, really James. I’m here. I know that it’ll be...” he swallows with some difficulty, “harder now, what with...” the alcohol seems to have robbed Sirius of his ability to finish his sentences.

“The hiding,” James decides to help him out, feeling Sirius nod against him. In the dark the light catches Sirius’s eyes, making them look like water.

“But I will always be here, always, always. Okay? For you. For Lily. For Harry.”

James’s chest is starting to feel uncomfortably tight. “I wish you and Moons would just move in.”

Sirius laughs quietly, though there’s something heavy about it. “It never feels right, does it? All of us not being together.”

James shakes his head. “No,” he whispers, like it’s a secret. “Never.”

A new certainty seems to take hold of Sirius and he pulls back from James, who sways unintentionally into the empty space he’s left.

“That’s why I want you to have this.”

At first, because of the light, and also because of the alcohol, James can’t tell what it is. It looks...wet...maybe? And then he realizes—

“A mirror?” James takes the ornate handle he’s offered and holds the mirror up.

“They talk to one another,” Sirius explains as he shows James its twin. James squints at his best mate.

“Talk to one another?”

Sirius nods at the the item in question. “Look at the reflection.”

So James does, expecting to see the blurry image of his own face. What he ends up seeing is the blurry image of Sirius’s face. His eyes snap up, and then back down, multiple times.

“We can use these,” Sirius says when he decides that James has been confused long enough. “No Floo, no letters. I’ll always have this with me okay?” James looks at Sirius again, his swimming eyes holding him. “Wherever I am, whatever I’m doing, you’ll be able to contact me. Okay?” He grabs hold of James’s neck again with his free hand. “I’m here.”

Fuck, James is too drunk for this many emotions.

“That goes both ways,” he finally manages. “I’ll carry it, always.”

James isn’t sure who moves first, but the next thing he knows they have their arms wrapped around one another, the embrace almost violent, almost knocking them off their feet.

“I really love you, you know,” Sirius says into his shoulder.

James squeezes him tighter, as though worried he’s going to suddenly disappear. “I love you too.”

James didn’t want to make Sirius the Secret Keeper.

I mean, he did.

But.

He didn’t want to give Remus and Sirius something else to fight about.

Another ocean in their relationship that neither of them could cross.

Another thing they couldn’t say.

So James had wanted to pick someone else.

Except.

Except he couldn’t.

It was Sirius.

It was always going to be Sirius.

Harry provides a good distraction at first. Babies, it turns out, take up quite a bit of time. Convenient, since now Lily and James have so much of it. It isn't terribly noticeable at first, that they're prisoners. It doesn't really sink in until the day James tries to go flying and finds that the wards Dumbledore set up won't even let him in the back garden.

It is a shock to no one that James is terrible at staying put. Being still. Quiet. Patient. He talks to Sirius every day. Sometimes Remus is there. Sometimes Peter. They tell him what's going on—at least to the extent that they're allowed, which, thanks to Moody, is not much. James becomes increasingly bitter about this since obviously he isn't the fucking spy is he? And It's not like he can see anyone to spread information. But apparently Moody doesn't believe in exceptions.

"I probably won't be able to talk tomorrow."

Sirius looks nearly as miserable as James feels, sitting slouched on his sofa, hair in a messy bun, heavy bags under his eyes. Remus is sitting next to him, cup of tea clutched between both hands.

Merlin, James can't help thinking, *when did we all start looking so old?*

"Why?" he cringes at how petulant he sounds, but if Sirius notices he doesn't comment, only blowing out a breath that disturbs some of the fly away hairs framing his forehead.

"I—"

"Sirius," Remus warns, earning him a glare from both of them.

"Who is he gonna tell Remus? Honestly."

"You don't know who's listening," Remus insists.

"I promise Harry won't snitch," James intends for it to be a joke but the bitterness in his voice is undeniable.

Remus gives him an apologetic look. "Listen, I know how mental this sounds—"

"Do you?" Sirius demands, and now they're all glaring.

"Yes. I do. But we have no idea how these mirrors even work—how easy they are to hack into. Not to mention our flat."

"Our flat?" Sirius repeats. "What the hell is wrong with our flat?"

“It could be bugged! It’s not exactly a secret that we live here, in this very busy, well known location.”

Sirius lets out a heavy sigh and, James assumes, throws his arms in the air, because for a minute he gets a very good look at the ceiling.

“Jesus Christ Remus.”

“I’m just saying!”

“You’re just fucking paranoid.”

“No shit I’m paranoid! Haven’t you been paying attention?”

“Oh don’t start—“

“OI!” James shouts, free hand massaging his temple. “Enough, enough. Merlin, you’d think you two were the ones locked up in a house together.”

Both of them look a little embarrassed, which isn’t really what James wants either.

“Sorry James, I just—“

But James stops Remus with his hand. “It’s fine, really, you’re right—“

Sirius scoffs.

“He IS right,” James sends Sirius a pointed look. “So lets just...talk about something else. Okay?”

There's a tense moment of silence before Remus eventually clears his throat. “How are things, you know, with you and Lily?”

How are things with Lily?

That is an interesting question.

They’re around one another all the time, inescapably so, with a new born baby who—despite being extraordinarily well behaved, James still maintains—loves to get them up several times a night. Lily only knows how to take care of a baby the Muggle way and James the magical way, and while most of the time those two systems cohabit nicely, every once and a while they do clash. Like when James charmed the teddybears to watch Harry for an hour while he chatted with Sirius the other night.

Still, despite it all, James thinks that oddly, miraculously, they might actually be—

“Good,” he says finally, eyes refocusing on his two mates who are now watching him rather intently. “Maybe it sounds weird but I feel like we’ve been...missing Harry, y’know? He... everything just makes more sense with him.”

He doesn't mention the way he sometimes fantasizes about what it would've been like, to introduce Harry to Regulus. To see him holding him. How that...makes sense too. Fills in some gap for James.

Sirius looks completely lost but Remus offers James a soft smile. "I'm happy for you."

Regardless of how well he and Lily are coping James still feels about ten seconds away from pulling his hair out most of the time. He's already read pretty well every book in the cottage—Remus has agreed to have Sirius bring him more—and he's grown so bored that he's actually dragged some of his father's old potions stuff out of the basement and started experimenting.

"If you accidentally curse us I'm going to be so unimpressed Potter," Lily says one day, bouncing Harry up and down on her knee as she watches James hover over a bubbling potion.

"O ye of little faith," James says, chopping up a frog's foot.

"I have seven years of potions's classes that tell me not to trust you with a cauldron."

"Oi!" James says mildly offended. "I was good at potions."

"It's more your evil mind that frightens me, not so much your lack of ability."

He shoots her a cheeky grin. "You think I have an evil mind? Gosh golly gee Lily Potter, are you trying to seduce me? Cause it's working," he winks.

Lily tries and fails to keep a straight face, eventually laughing, which causes Harry to make some happy gurgling noises James assumes are him joining in.

Sometimes he loves them so much it hurts.

He starts staying up later, because it's one of the few ways he can be alone. Get some space. Lily and Harry asleep upstairs while he fiddles with his potions. One night, for some reason, he finds himself casting his Patronus. And then he does it again the night after. And after. And After. He doesn't know why.

Well, okay.

Maybe he does know why.

It sits with him, a calm, soothing presence. Filling James's nights with a safe blueish glow. And whispered conversations.

"What do you reckon Reg?" he says softly. "Do we crush the the pomegranate seeds or put them in whole?"

Funny. But he swears the stag is listening.

It's only shortly after James discovers that the invisibility cloak allows him to walk through Dumbledore's wards that the old man comes round asking for it. He doesn't think it's a coincidence, nor does he appreciate being treated like a child—having his toys taken away. But the problem with Dumbledore is, as much as you might want to, you can't ever say no to him.

Well, unless you're Mary Macdonald.

But almost no one is.

Dumbledore says he'll give it back. That he just needs it for some research he's been doing. James doesn't say much to him. Teeth clenched, hands in fists. Every fibre of his being revolting against the idea of handing it over. But in the end he does.

Of course he does.

His last bit of freedom.

He's not sure Dumbledore knows what he's taking. Or maybe he doesn't care.

All of their communications have to go through Sirius, who, to his credit, takes on the task of letter carrier graciously. James knows Lily is lonely. She does not have a magical mirror instantly connecting her to her friends. Hell, she doesn't even have an owl anymore. And while Sirius does his best to make regular visits, it's difficult.

Lily writes a lot of letters. There's not much else to do to be fair. They sit on her desk and wait for Sirius to come pick them up and James fights the urge to ask her what's in them.

It's none of his business.

But he can't help but wonder.

Harry is in the sink—too small for the bathtub—wet and rosy cheeked and smiling as he plays with the little rubber Snitch James conjured for him. Harry isn't talking yet but he is smiling. He smiles a lot. And the gurgling has definitely started to sound more like laughter.

"I think we might have a Seeker on our hands," James says as he works the baby shampoo into Harry's impressively thick hair.

"Oh yeah?" Lily is only half-listening, sitting in the empty bathtub behind him, reading through the letters Sirius brought over earlier that day.

"He's obsessed with this thing," and then, to prove his point, he picks up the Snitch in question and tickles Harry's little belly with it. "Isn't that right, huh? Isn't that right?"

Harry makes that gurgly-giggly noise and James can't help but beam back at him.

"To be fair," Lily says, "you're also obsessed with it and you're a Chaser."

James considers that for a moment. "True enough I suppose."

He's just towelling Harry off—who is beginning to get a little grumpy—when Lily gasps. He turns around to find her scrambling to her feet, eyes wide and on the letter in her hands. He feels his heart stutter.

"What?" he asks, trying to keep the panic out of his voice as he holds Harry a little closer. "What's happened? What is it?"

But then Lily is laughing. "Marlene and Dorcas," she looks up, eyes bright. "They're engaged!"

"Holy shit," James says, before looking guiltily down at Harry and whispering; "Don't tell anyone I said that."

Harry just blinks up at him, making an unhappy noise. Clearly someone needs a nap.

"God I can't believe this," Lily is practically vibrating, standing in the middle of the tub and bouncing up and down on the balls of her feet. James can't help but smile. "Apparently Marlene is the one who did it, bought a ring, got down on one knee, the whole thing."

"Makes sense," James says, kissing the top of Harry's head just because it's there.

"Man I just—" some of the bubbling excitement drains out of her. "I can't believe I can't see her," and then, looking up at James fiercely, as though expecting a fight. "There's no way I'm not going to this wedding."

James nods even though he knows it isn't up to them, not really. Lily knows that too so there's no reason to point it out. "I can't imagine they would have it without you."

Lily looks back down at the letter, and James can practically feel the longing wafting off of her. “I just don’t want to...miss everything, you know? I just want to be there. Does that sound awful...selfish.” She suddenly looks at Harry, guilt clear in her eyes, like she’s done something wrong.

“No,” James steps forward, kissing her head too. “No it doesn’t.”

It’s only been a few months, but James feels it too.

Like the world is moving on without them.

It’s fucking terrifying.

His Patronus trails around the border of the room. And for a moment all James can do is stare and ache.

“Bones is missing,” Sirius’s haggard voice comes through the mirror.

“Bones?”

“Frederick Bones.”

“Shit.”

Sirius nods in agreement. “Connor, Mark, Kathy, a few others I don’t know, all dead— Order meetings are a rather intimate affair these days.”

“Oh my God James! James!”

James comes running into the living room from the kitchen to find Lily and Harry on the ground. She looks over at him, smiling widely.

“Harry’s crawling! Look, look, look,” she scoots back a little and then holds out her hands to Harry who is currently on his belly. “Come here darling, come on, come here!”

Harry makes a bit of a face—James secretly thinks of it as his poop face—before all the sudden getting his hands under him and dragging himself forward towards Lily.

“Wow look at him go,” James says as Lily gathers the baby in her arms and nuzzles at his head.

“You hear that Harry? You did such a good job. Now I just need you to say momma.”

James rolls his eyes. “His first word is gonna to be dada and we all know it.”

Lily looks up and sticks her tongue out at him and James laughs.

“I don’t know, I think he might be a Beater,” Sirius holds one of Harry’s little arms up. “Look at these things, rippling mate.”

James snorts from where he’s sitting in the armchair across the room. “If rippling muscles were a requirement for a good Beater you wouldn’t have even been allowed on the Pitch.”

“Wow, rude,” he dips his head low, whispering to Harry conspiratorially. “Don’t listen to your dad, he doesn’t know what he’s talking about. I’m well fit. ”

Harry giggles, likely because Sirius’s breath is tickling his cheek, but Sirius still looks up at James triumphantly. “He thinks I’m funny.”

James rolls his eyes. “He thinks his toes are funny.”

Sirius makes a thoughtful expression before looking down at Harry’s socked feet. He reaches out and gives one a light squeeze. “To be fair, they are kinda.”

“Oi!”

“What! I’m just saying—“

“Boys,” Lily chides playfully as she walks into the room, putting a bowl of crisps on the table before sitting down on the floor, leaning back against James’s legs. “Am I going to have to separate you two?”

“He’s insulting our son’s toes!”

Sirius scoffs. “Please, if anything I was complimenting his well developed sense of humour.”

Lily snorts. “Well, at least you’re not arguing over something silly.”

“Silly?”

“Us?”

“Never.”

“Can’t even picture it really.”

“Nor can I Prongs, nor can I.”

“You’re right,” Lily half-laughs, reaching for the crisps. “Don’t know what I was thinking.”

There’s a small pause, Sirius playing with Harry while James watches, feeling more at ease than he has in days. Maybe weeks. The impatient buzzing that’s recently been growing louder beneath his skin has turned down to a quiet hum.

“So,” Lily asks. “How’re things? How’s Remus?”

Sirius shrugs, still playing with Harry who is making a series of nonsense noises. It’s his new favourite thing. Like he’s talking back to you even though he doesn’t know any words. Sometimes James babbles with him.

“Moony’s fine, or, you know, was the last time I saw him.”

Ah.

Gone again then.

It’s been years of this now. You’d think they’d all be used to it but somehow it never feels mundane, Remus’s disappearances. Never feels routine. It’s isn’t that they all haven’t vanished from time to time, but Remus’s disappearances are certainly the longest and the most consistent. And he is, as Sirius always very bitterly points out, the most secretive.

James and Lily exchange a quick glance and James opens his mouth to say something comforting when Harry beats him to it.

“Moomy, moomy, moomy,” he mutters, pulling on Sirius’s collar. Lily pops up onto her knees.

“Did he just say mommy?” she asks excitedly.

“No way,” James will not be losing this battle.

“I told you I was gonna be his first word!”

“He did NOT say mommy, you’re hearing things Evans.”

“You wish Potter.”

“Oi!” Sirius interrupts, still looking down at Harry. “Would you two shut it, the kid is trying to talk.”

They quiet down, though James does nudge Lily with his foot, causing her to retaliate by elbowing him in the shins.

Harry has largely gone back to his regular string of indistinguishable noises and James can practically feel Lily getting ready to go get the Pensieve so they can all replay the memory and listen to Harry say it again, when—

“Moomy,” pulling his fingers out of his mouth and looking up at Sirius. “Moony.”

There’s a beat of silence.

“Did he just—“

“Moony?”

“Moony!”

“What the hell!” James exclaims, throwing his hands up. “How does Remus get to be MY son’s first word when the bastard isn’t even here!”

Sirius says nothing, staring down at the Harry with something complicated in his eyes, causing Lily and James to once again share a glance. A few more seconds pass before James prods:

“Padfoot? You doing alright over there?”

“Yeah,” Sirius croaks. “Yeah just...” he lets the sentence hang so long that James is certain he isn’t going to finish it but then: “I think Remus feels a little on the outside these days...it’ll mean something to him, that Harry knows his name.”

"Well," there’s a small tremor in Lily’s voice. “I guess I can get over losing then.”

There’s a pause before she looks pointedly at James. “Pfft,” he scoffs. “Not me, I’m still fucking livid.”

That makes Sirius snort, Lily punching James’s thigh.

“Moony!” Harry exclaims excitedly, making Sirius laugh more.

“Yeah buddy,” he says softly. “Moony, Moony, Moony.”

The day that James tries to use the mirror and Sirius doesn’t pick up he knows something is wrong.

He doesn’t know how wrong, of course. Not yet. But it’s enough to start him worrying.

He sits on the end of the bed with the mirror gripped between his hands for close to an hour trying to get a response. But none comes.

That’s when the panic really sets in.

He paces around the room, not wanting to go downstairs and frightened Lily before he has some actual information—something more than his gut intuition and the certainty that Sirius would never willingly not pick up when he called.

He watches time tick by and does his best not to chew through his own cheek. Every few minutes he tries Sirius again but there's only silence, only James's reflection staring back at him. One hour turns to two. Then three. And then, finally, he hears a voice.

"James?"

He lifts the mirror up to eye level, the relief at seeing that Sirius is okay short lived when he takes in his pale face and the blank look in his eyes. When things get bad, truly bad, Sirius shuts off. Regulus was the same. A family trait—a way to protect themselves from the horrible things they had no choice but to live through.

"What is it? What's happened?"

James has an eery memory of sitting on the floor of his father's study, asking Sirius similar questions before having his world torn apart. He tries to push that away. Dragging up old pain won't help him now.

"Is Lily there?"

"Not in the room with me."

Sirius nods. "You should go get her." His voice is even. Empty. Some people might mistake it for calm. James is not some people. He sees it for what it is—devastation.

"Sirius—"

"She needs to hear this too. And it's better...not being alone."

James swallows with difficulty. "You're scaring me Sirius."

The other boy only nods. "Go get Lily."

He doesn't bother fighting it, happy when he goes downstairs and finds Harry already down for his afternoon nap, that'll make things easier. Lily looks up from the book in her lap, giving James a small smile until she sees the expression on his face.

"What is it?" she asks.

James only shakes his head. "Sirius wants to talk to both of us."

He sees Lily's eyes drop to the mirror in his hands and then slide over to Harry. "The kitchen?" she says after a moment, and James nods, the pair of them quickly moving into the other room.

"Hey Lily," Sirius says wearily when they're seated at the table, both visible in the mirror's reflection.

"Sirius, what's going on?"

For a moment he just looks back at them, mouth half open, struggling around the words, like they're trying desperately to scramble back down his throat.

For the first time there's a crack in his mask, pain flashing in his eyes. He closes them briefly, taking a deep breath. "The McKinnion's were attacked," James feels the sensation of cold dread dripping down his spine, Lily rigid beside him. "They—they're all dead." His words quiver even while his expression remains unchanged. "Marlene's dead."

Lily shakes her head. "No."

"It looks like it was fast. Not much—I don't think she—" Sirius's voice cuts out and he closes his eyes again.

"No," Lily repeats, before standing up and walking out of the room.

"Lily—" James is half out of his seat already. "Sirius I'll call you back okay?"

"There's something else," the crack in Sirius's voice brings James to a halt. He inspects his friend's face.

"What?"

Sirius sighs. "Dorcas is missing."

"What?"

He hears a loud bang in the other room and looks nervously down the hall. A second later Harry starts to cry.

"She wasn't with Mar. She was working and when she heard she fucking took off," Sirius wipes a hand over his face. "We're looking for her but, god, I don't know. I feel like she's gone and—" his voice breaks again.

Dorcas and Sirius have been working together a lot James knows.

And Marlene—

There's another bang, Harry screaming his little lungs out now.

"Fuck—okay I have to go. Are you—is Remus?"

Sirius shakes his head. "It's fine. Go. I'll call back when I can yeah?"

James nods. "Be careful."

He doesn't know who he's supposed to go to first; Lily or Harry. He's shaking and a little cold and he knows he isn't processing anything, that this will hit him like a brick wall later but he's grateful for the numbness now.

He finds Lily in the study, door flung open, her wand in her hand as she fires spells at the fireplace.

“Lily—“

“I need to get out of this house,” she waves her wand, casting god knows what. James is fairly certain Dumbledore fully took them off the grid and he’s pretty sure there’s no way for them to reconnect on this end. “I need to see her.”

“See who?” James asks, taking a tentative step forward, both arms raised.

“Marlene. I have to see her.”

“Lily—“

“She isn’t,” Lily snaps, firing another spell that bounces off the mantle causing James to duck. He can hear Harry screaming and it’s twisting up his stomach. “She’s hurt maybe, or something, but she isn’t—she isn’t—“ Lily just shakes her head, tears filling her eyes. “Not Marlene, you know? She’s so—she has so much life and she’s so smart and so strong, so she just can’t be—she can’t be. It isn’t possible.”

She raises her wand again but this time James moves, stepping in front of her. “You’ve gotta stop, you’re gonna do something to the house, it might hurt Harry. You have to stop.”

Lily blinks, looking at him for the first time. For a moment he’s worried that she’s going to fire anyway but she doesn’t, instead she pushes him out of the way and starts for the front door.

“Fine, I’ll just break the fucking wards then.”

“Lily!” he follows after her, walking by the living room where Harry wails for their attention. “If you break the wards you’re putting us at risk.”

“I don’t care,” her hand on the doorknob. “Something has happened to Marlene and I need to find her, I need to be with her, I need to—to—“

He wraps his arms around her from the behind, pulling her back into the house.

“Let me fucking go James!”

“I’m sorry, I’m so sorry but I can’t. We have to think about Harry, we have to—“

“Let me go! Let me go! Let me go!” she’s sobbing now, kicking and punching as James drags her back into the living room.

“I’m sorry,” his voice wobbles. “But we can’t do anything.”

“No.”

“Lily—“

“This can’t keep happening!” she shouts desperately, voice scraping itself raw on her teeth. “How can this keep happening? How can we—no, I won’t. I won’t lose her. I can’t lose her. Please let me go. Please, please I just need to see her. I just need to hear her voice. Please. I can’t do this again. I can’t lose someone again. Please.”

They’ve somehow ended up on the floor, James curling himself around Lily as she stops fighting him and starts just crying. Shaking so badly James can barely keep his grip.

“I’m sorry,” he whispers, kissing her temple. It’s all he can say. It’s all he has. “I’m sorry.” He hears the scratchiness of his own voice. Harry howling in the background. “I’m sorry.” He thinks he’s crying now too and he hopes Harry can’t see. He hopes he has no idea what’s going on. He hopes he never remembers this moment.

Hopes his life isn’t a series of moments just like it.

It takes Voldemort himself to kill Dorcas. Though she manages to take quite a few of his followers down with her.

They can’t go to the funerals, of course.

Lily shuts herself away in their bedroom.

Harry’s first birthday comes and goes. They bake a cake, they sing songs, Harry makes an absolute mess.

Sirius sends him a toy broom which James honestly falls in love with as much as Harry does. The kid taking to it like it’s the most natural thing in the world—speeding around, giggling. James is jealous honestly. It’s been ages since he’s flown.

That night he stays up late, his Patronus glowing brightly beside him as he sits with his head in his hands.

“I don’t want his whole life to be like this,” he says.

He doesn’t know who he’s talking to.

Well.

Okay.

Maybe he does.

“Trapped in this house. He should be outside, he should be surrounded by family and other kids and not just our fucking misery.” Because nothing has been the same since Marlene and Dorcas. How could it be?

“This house is full of grief,” James sighs, scrubbing at his eyes. “I don’t want his life to be full of grief,” and then: “I don’t want my life to be full of grief.”

It’s a month or so later that Sirius shows up unannounced.

He looks nervous, like he hasn’t been sleeping, pacing up and down their living room as they watch from the sofa, ringing his hands, pulling at his hair. It feels like they wait a long time, his anxiety too loud to interrupt, to cut through, filling the whole room and making all of them squirm.

Until eventually he stops, eyes wide, begging them to understand. “I think you need to pick a new Secret Keeper.”

Which is not at all what James was expecting.

“What?”

“I think I’m too obvious,” Sirius goes on, with the air of someone who has had this thought again and again and again. “And I’m worried—I’m worried that they’ll be able to kill me. And if they do then you won’t be safe anymore.” James can’t quite understand why he looks so guilty. “I would die for you, for all of you, in a heartbeat. You know that,” he looks pleadingly at James who nods quickly.

“Of course I do.”

“But I don’t want to be the reason you’re not safe. I don’t want to be the reason—“ he swallows. “You need a new Secret Keeper.”

James wants to argue with him, but he isn’t sure that Sirius is entirely wrong. It’s not exactly a secret how close they are, and while Sirius might not mind dying for them, James certainly doesn’t want him to.

“Who are you thinking?” Lily asks eventually. “Remus?”

There’s that guilt again. Sirius looks away, shaking his head. “No, still too obvious,” James thinks there’s more than that but Sirius doesn’t give him the chance to push. “Peter.”

“Peter?” James asks, surprised.

Sirius looks up again, more certainty in his gaze. “No one will suspect it. Not him. Not Pete. No one ever thinks it’s Pete, not even back in school.”

James chews on his bottom lip, thinking, before he looks to Lily.

“It makes sense,” she says finally.

He isn’t sure why it doesn’t feel right, why the idea makes something itch inside of his chest. Eventually he turns back to Sirius. “You think this is our best option?”

Sirius nods. “They’ll come for me, it’s only a matter of time. At least this way, if they manage to...at least this way you’ll be okay.”

Which couldn’t be further from the truth.

If Sirius dies James dies. But he doesn’t bother pointing that out. Doesn’t think he needs to. Clearly this has been weighing on Sirius, so, eventually, he nods.

“Someone should go get Pete.”

“Wait, wait, wait!” Lily dashes up the stairs, leaving Harry and James to stare at one another, James holding a camera.

“Don’t look at me,” he says to the one year old. “I don’t know what she’s doing.”

Harry gives him a wide eyed blink. “Moomy.”

It isn’t that Harry hasn’t learned any other words, he has. Like broom, and hungry, and no. But the only name he seems to have picked up is Moony. For whatever reason.

“Not quite buddy,” James says as he hears the sound of Lily running back down the stairs, skidding into the living room.

“He needs his hat!” she says breathlessly. “It makes the whole thing.”

“Uh-huh.”

She shoots him a glare as she pulls the round cap with the pointed stem over Harry’s head. Stepping back and smiling. “There, perfect.”

In fairness, the hat really does pull it all together. Little Harry sitting in the middle of the sofa dressed like a very convincing pumpkin. “Okay,” James says, lifting the camera up to his face, “say cheese.”

Harry smiles most of the time so it isn’t hard to get a good picture. Honestly James thinks he could stare at him for hours—his big green eyes, his dark peach fuzz hair, his chubby cheeks.

Perfect.

Everything about him is perfect.

“Oi!” James laughs as Lily rushes into the frame, jumping on the sofa and peppering Harry with kisses. “M’am, please, you’re harassing my model.” Though he snaps a few more photos while he says it.

“I can’t help it, he’s so cute,” she pulls Harry into her lap, his hat lost as she bounces him up and down on her knee. “Aren’t you?” she says in a baby voice, leaning forward to brush their noses together. “Aren’t you just the cutest?” Harry giggles and James puts down the camera, coming over to join them.

“We should have bought sweets,” he says, arm draped over Lily’s shoulders, pulling her into his side. “Bit of a sad Halloween without them.”

Lily laughs. “He’s a baby, he can’t eat sweets.”

“Who says they would be for him?”

Harry is playing with Lily’s necklace and occasionally interspersing his baby babble with actual words. Something about the moment—the three of them sitting together on the sofa—makes James feel settled. Almost calm. A rare thing these days.

“Take him for a minute?” Lily says as she shifts Harry to James’s lap, “I’m just going to run upstairs and put on some music.”

“If it’s not Monster Mash I don’t wanna hear it!” James shouts after her.

“You know, sometimes I can’t tell who the baby is, you or Harry!”

“Oi!” and then, leaning down and whispering to Harry; “It’s me, but don’t tell her I said that.”

Harry just blinks at him, and then giggles, causing a smile to spread across James’s face.

“You really are unfairly cute,” he goes on in the same quiet tone. “I’m not saying you should be grateful, but we honestly outdid ourselves with this,” he waves his hand vaguely at Harry’s face, which, of course, has the toddler reaching out and trying to stuff James’s fingers in his mouth.

“Hopefully you get your mum’s eyesight along with her eyes though,” he goes on as Harry attempts to eat him. “The glasses are a real pain especially on the Pitch,” another smile creeps up on him. “Merlin, I can’t wait to watch you play. You’re gonna be brilliant, I can already tell.”

Sometimes, when he looks at Harry, when he thinks about everything he wants to show him and tell him and watch him do, he feels like his chest is too small. Like it can’t hold the impossible amount of love he has for this one little being.

“This doesn’t sound like Monster Mash!” he says, as Lily starts coming back down the stairs.

“That’s because I have taste,” he watches her face warm as she comes through the doorway. “Aw, you two look so cozy.”

“Excuse you, we’re very fearsome, isn’t that right pumpkin?” he leans down and presses a kiss to Harry’s forehead causing him to squirm.

“Uh-huh,” Lily climbs back onto the sofa, curling into James’s side. She hums along to the song which Harry seems to enjoy quite a bit, clapping and reaching for her. In general he’s an excellent source of entertainment. Sure, his abilities to articulate thoughts and move are limited, but Harry’s always doing something. And everything he does is fascinating to James.

That’s when he feels it.

A slight tremor.

But it isn’t coming from the ground, like an earthquake, instead it’s the space around them. The air rippling.

Lily instantly sits up. “That was weird.”

Quiet falls over the house. A moment ago there was the noise of children out on the street, banging on doors, demanding sweets. The popping of Apparation as people jumped from one neighbourhood to the next. Talking. Laughing.

Now.

Now there’s nothing.

Not even the wind.

It’s unnerving.

Wordlessly James slides Harry off of his lap and into Lily’s arms. “James?” she asks, whispering, because it suddenly feels as though they need to be just as quiet as their surroundings.

Which is when James realizes; “The music’s stopped.”

Lily’s face scrunches up as she looks towards the ceiling, like she can see the record player. “Strange,” she murmurs. “I wonder if the needle got stuck?”

Sound is a wave. Physical even if we can’t see it. And all James can think about is that tremor. Powerful enough to knock the music out of the air.

“The wards,” he says finally. Moving faster now, towards the window. “It’s the wards. They’re broken.”

“What?” he hears the panic in Lily’s voice a moment before he’s able to see outside. Able to see the man walking leisurely up their front steps.

“James—“

“Lily it’s him,” he feels his body go numb, preventing him from being able to process those words. “You have to run.” There’s scuffling on the front stoop. The door’s locked of course. A laughable precaution.

“Run?”

“I’ll try to hold him off,” James is already heading for the front door. “Find a way out. Get Harry somewhere safe.”

The doorknob turns

“James—“

“Lily. Please.”

He’s shaking as he listens to the sound of her running up the stairs, reaching for his wand and laughing when he finds it isn’t there. He has no idea where he left it. In the kitchen after fixing a quick snack? The living room floor after playing with Harry? He barely needs it at all these days, he’s gotten lazy with it.

Of course, he’s been wand-less in moments like this before. Like when he was fifteen. Standing in the Shrieking Shack between Snape and Remus. Things worked out alright then. Maybe he’ll pull it off now too?

The sick feeling in his stomach suggests he doesn’t quite believe that.

Funny, how everything speeds up and slows down all at once. Seconds stretching into hours, the door opening for lifetimes. His lifetime. And the many lifetimes he didn’t live. James feels himself splintering even before he sees Voldemort’s face. The strings attached to all his possible endings being snipped one by one. All the choices he could have made falling away.

This is the last one.

There will be no more.

Where once there were multitudes now there is but a single boy. Naked. And alone. Standing at the front door of his family home. Meeting an unexpected guest. In a way, this is just how it all started.

He considers charging, maybe he can knock the wand out of the other man’s hand. Maybe, in the end, Voldemort will be taken down not by some great feat of magic but by desperate fists. It’s only a fleeting thought however, not even lasting a second.

The minute that James meets the older man’s eyes it’s already too late.

The spell cast.

As all his lives play out before his eyes in the pitiful moments before he dies, only one thought really rises above the other’s. So that, the last thing that James Potter thinks about, with his beating heart and fluttering pulse, is Sirius Black.

A moment in a train carriage, their eyes crashing into one another for the first time, like two suns colliding. He was bright without Sirius, but he was brighter with him. His universe set fundamentally to rights the moment they shook hands.

If Sirius dies James dies. And if James dies—

Sirius.

He barely feels it when the green bolt slides between his ribs. It's just a shiver really. A chill. Not so bad at all. Maybe it didn't work. Maybe something went wrong. Maybe he's still breathing.

Except that he's falling.

Crashing to the floor as the world becomes a mash of indistinguishable sounds and colours.

Oh Sirius, I'm so sor—

Inhale.

Exhale.

Exhale.

Exha—

PART IV SIRIUS

He feels it all.

All at once.

Inescapable.

He feels it all.

And it hurts,

hurts

hurts.

PART V REMUS

When Remus comes home the flat is dark.

PART VI MARY

It's been years since Mary Macdonald last stepped foot in Hogwarts. Probably just as long since she last stared across a desk at Albus Dumbledore. The quality of the experience has not improved.

"Petunia Evans."

"It's Dursley, actually," Dumbledore corrects her mildly.

There is something like rage humming beneath her skin, so close to the surface it's practically reaching across the desk. He should really be more careful.

"Lily would never have wanted that."

Dumbledore inclines his head in agreement. "Alas, the guardians she did want are currently indisposed."

Imprisoned.

Insane.

Mary's nails dig into the arms of her chair as his blue eyes stare calmly back at her. Twinkling. Like he's enjoying this.

"Then let me take him."

The older man arches his brow. "You want to raise their baby?" he tugs lightly on his beard. "I must admit Ms. Macdonald, I am rather surprised. You always seemed so reluctant to get involved."

It's an obvious attack. Boring and uninspired. "Yes, well, I'm full of surprises."

He smiles. It isn't reassuring. "You certainly are. Unfortunately, the child has to stay where he is. Though I'm sure James and Lily would have appreciated your willingness to help."

Mary barely holds in the urge to rip their names out of his mouth. "Sorry," she says, voice blank. "I misspoke earlier. What I meant to say was; I will be taking Harry. Seeing as he is not yours to give away I actually don't require your permission. I just needed to know where he was."

She moves to get up but Dumbledore's words stop her. "I do actually have authority in this matter, as it happens. Since Remus Lupin was Black's legal common law partner, and the two

named guardians have been deemed unfit to make decisions, the power of Harry's guardianship falls to him," still smiling. "And he has chosen to defer to me."

"Bullshit," she snaps. "Remus is catatonic, he can barely speak let alone legally consent to anything."

Dumbledore opens his palms to her. "The Ministry disagrees with you."

"Fuck the Ministry."

"If you'd like to check this with the Minister I can certainly organize a meeting—"

"Fuck the Ministry and fuck you," her vision blurs around the edges, seconds away from exploding. From burning the school down. "I'm taking Harry."

She doesn't wait for a reply, turning on her heel and heading towards the door. The only thing stopping her from reaching for her wand is the knowledge that Harry already has one person who was meant to care for him in jail. He certainly doesn't need another.

"Ms. Macdonald."

She doesn't stop.

Has no interest in what he has to say.

Never has really.

"Ms. Macdonald—Mary."

Hand on the doorknob.

"29 Hendford Hill."

She freezes, her whole body going stiff.

"That's your brother's address is it not? Damian?"

She turns to face him, the rage transforming into something else. Something like acid. Something like fear. Dumbledore is standing now, illuminated by the tall windows behind him. He almost glows.

"You will leave Harry Potter where he is," all warmth gone from his voice. The curtain pulled back. The Wizard of Oz revealed. "You will not speak to him, you will not write to him, you will have no contact with him at all."

She wonders how they all missed it. How they couldn't see. She doesn't know if it would have made a difference. Maybe they'd all still be gone even without Dumbledore's help.

"And I promise," the old man goes on, "to show your brother the same courtesy."

To let him live.

For the first time in years, Mary Macdonald feels herself crack.

PART VII PETER

Peter has never given much thought to what kind of person he is.

Those larger questions, the ones that try to tear life open and understand it, never appeal to him. Those are Remus's specialty.

Peter simply is a person. That is enough for him.

When he feels desire he moves towards it.

When he feels fear he moves away.

He does not think life is meant to be more complicated than that. We're animals after all. Things only mean more because we decide they do.

Death, is one of those things.

Peter has lost himself to grief. To the pain of it. The ache. But that was before he realized he had a choice.

Death hurts because humans decide to make it hurt.

They decide you should cry.

Tear your hair out.

Scream.

So you do. But death, like life, has no inherent meaning. It simply is. A fact. A state of being. There's no need for all the theatrics. No need to tear yourself up about it. If you simply ignore everything you're taught, death can be something quite mundane.

Well.

Other people's deaths, in any case.

Peter first learned this as he stood over Marlene McKinnon's body.

Initially, there was that swelling of feeling. That ache. That pain. But then he'd made himself *stop*.

Stop.

Stop it.

It doesn't mean anything. Doesn't actually hurt. You just think it does. You've just been taught that it does. But that isn't actually how you feel.

In the end her death had seemed almost dull. Like there really ought to have been more to it. He'd stood over her, eyes staring up at him unseeing, and thought; "that wasn't so bad." He could do it again. If it was necessary. If he needed to. If it kept him alive. Because that did matter, that always mattered.

Peter mattered.

That's what the Dark Lord said.

It was one of the many reasons he was growing tired of his school friends. Especially Remus and Sirius. Listening to them suspect one another. Giving each other credit for his work. At first he had taken it as a compliment, that they didn't think he would ever turn on them, but he quickly realized that wasn't what it was. They had simply forgotten to consider him all together. He was a non-factor. Too lowly even to be suspected.

Voldemort, on the other hand, never forgot about Peter. He corresponded with him frequently, smiling whenever Peter came to see him. There had been no more fuck-ups since the travesty at the Ministry two years ago, and that had placed Peter firmly back in the Dark Lord's good graces. The Dark Lord had even revealed his identity to his more high-ranking followers. Forcing Lucius Malfoy and Rodolphus Lestrage to thank him for his great service. When there were meetings he sat at the head of the table.

It was impossible not to notice him.

Not to see him.

Not to consider him.

Still, it wasn't actually his intent to give James up to Voldemort. At least not at first. It meant a great deal to him that James had decided to change his mind. To make Peter the Secret Keeper—as he should have been all along honestly. Sirius was far too brash for something like that. Too careless. Peter had always felt he was the obvious choice.

For a while he had become quite devoted to James again, visiting often, delivering whatever it was that he and Lily needed, playing with little baby Harry. He'd honestly started to reconsider things. Clearly James was coming around, seeing him the way he had when they were kids, before Hogwarts—as someone worthy of his time.

He mattered.

Peter mattered.

But more and more he noticed that all James ever wanted to talk about was the others; Sirius, Remus, Mary, Alice, Frank. It was never questions about Peter. He had come up with dozens of excuses he could use to explain his frequent absences but he never needed them. No one asked where he'd been or what he was up to. No one cared much how he spent his time.

There had been years when he had been James Potter's closest friend. His only friend, really. They had spent nearly every day together. How could James just forget that? Toss it all aside for Sirius? It wasn't that Peter didn't like Sirius. Or Remus. Of course he did. But he didn't like them more than he liked himself.

James had seen something in him once. Something that had made him leave a room full of people to follow Peter upstairs. Somehow he'd lost sight of that. But Peter was tired of being forgotten. And tired of being afraid. They all thought they knew better than him, but they were on the wrong side. The losing side. And while all of them sunk Peter floated.

Regulus Black left a hole in Voldemort's ranks. His family name would have made him the obvious choice to be Voldemort's protégé. He wouldn't even have needed to work for it, to prove his worth—it all would have been handed to him. But he bumbled it. He hadn't figured out what Peter had—that you get to choose what matters. What means something. You get to choose what is right and what is wrong.

Peter thinks again of the memory of Marlene's dead body.

It had been right, in the end, that she die.

Right for him anyway.

And now he can take Regulus's place the same way Sirius has taken his—there's a neat sort of symmetry in that.

So though it took him a few months to decide, he did eventually turn James over to Voldemort. And he expected the same nothing as he'd felt with Marlene. Really this ought to be even easier, since he wouldn't be there.

And in a way, it was. There was no fretting—well, not much fretting—no tearing out of hair, no crying. Peter simply went about his day like anyone else. And yet. At exactly 8:32 pm on October 31st 1981, Peter's world dimmed.

He would argue with himself about this for years to come.

Because that was absurd.

The loss of one person could not possibly alter the universe so greatly.

But somehow all colours felt suddenly less vibrant. The food he ate less tasteful. Every piece of music, every summer's day, every touch—duller.

He was certain he was making it up.

Certain.

But what he could not deny, what he eventually accepted the day his own hand wrapped around his neck, was that no matter how high he rose, how far out of the muck and dust of the war he was able to elevate himself, how close to the top Peter Pettigrew got.

He never did feel the sun again.

Chapter End Notes

I don't really have the words to describe what writing this story has meant
There is so much of it that is so deeply personal for me and the fact that it has resonated with so many of you is more than I ever could have asked for when I started writing it

So thank you all for sticking around, for your patience and your kindness and for all collectively agreeing that James is so fucking dumb for thinking Remus had a crush on Mary in chapter 2, like bro please get it together

THERE IS STILL AN EPILOGUE it should be posted in the next few days and it'll end us on a bit of a happier note but, yeah, wow, okay, bye I guess????? Yeesh

Hope y'all are having a good day :)

Epilogue

Chapter Notes

****French translations at the end****

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Past the ocean-stream they went, past the white rock, past the portals of the sun and land of dreams, and soon they reached the field of asphodel, where spirits dwell, spectres of worn-out men. Here they came upon the spirit of Achilles, son of Peleus, and of Patroclus too.

This is the place where everything and nothing touch and all that we are is set free, spilling over our lines, bleeding out. Memories, thoughts, feelings, no longer contained by the borders of our bodies. Here is where life and death are old friends who meet for tea, and ask after one another's health. Here is where a boy with dark curls and stormy eyes stands in a garden somewhere in Scotland, tall grass tickling his kneecaps as he watches the clouds on the horizon.

His eyes close and he tilts his head up, basking in the light. The sun, usually distant and faded—a memory and nothing more—today, is bright and warm, placing gentle kisses on his cheeks, his hair, his shoulders.

“Okay I give up, what are you doing?”

Regulus's eyes snap open as he spins around. James Potter is leaning against one of the trees behind him, arms crossed over his chest, a smile hanging from the corner of his mouth, the sun glinting off his glasses. The messy haired boy squints up at the sky.

“No stars, so you're not talking to anyone. Sun tanning maybe? You'll have to take off a few more layers for that,” he gives Regulus a wink.

“What?”

“I said—“

“No—shut up—I heard you.”

James holds his hands up in surrender. “Hey, you asked.”

“I meant—“ Regulus cuts himself off, scrubbing at his eyes. “What are you doing here?” his voice shakes.

“Shamelessly ogling you.”

“No—stop it—stop,” he’s shaking. “You can’t be here.”

“*Reg*,” James’s voice goes soft and it makes every part of Regulus—every thought and feeling and memory that makes him up—crumble to dust.

“No,” he shakes his head. “Tell me this isn’t—this isn’t real. You can’t be here.”

“Reg,” he sounds closer but Regulus can’t open his eyes.

“I did the right thing,” his voice wobbles.

“I know.”

“You were supposed to be okay. I did the right thing, dangerous and stupid, but I did it so that you would be okay. You were supposed to be okay.”

Regulus doesn’t know how he can be struggling to breathe when he doesn’t even have a pulse.

“Reg,” in that same soft voice. “Look at me?”

“No.”

“Please?”

“Go away. Please go away. Please don’t be here. Don’t be here. James you shouldn’t be here. You were having a baby.”

“Had him—well, Lily had him if we’re being technical about it.”

“This isn’t funny.”

“Reg,” he sighs. “Please look at me?”

He doesn’t want to. He really doesn’t. So he has no idea why he does, but then, he’s never been able to control himself with James. The garden comes back into focus, James’s eyes colliding with his.

And his heart,

the one that doesn’t beat anymore,

doesn’t even exist really,

hiccup,

hiccup,

hiccups.

James offers him a gentle smile. “There you are.”

Regulus is still shaking his head. “Just this once,” his voice breaks, “I wanted to be the one to catch you.”

If James is confused he doesn’t show it, instead he opens his arms—an invitation. Regulus launches himself forward, surprised to find James so solid. So sturdy. So real. His fingers tangle in James’s shirt. He’s desperate not to let him go. Heartbroken he has him at all.

“I’m so proud of you,” James whispers, kissing the top of Regulus’s head. “You were so brave.”

“It didn’t matter.”

“It mattered. Reg, of course it mattered.”

A pained noise comes from Regulus’s throat as he pulls James closer, like he wants to slip inside his skin. Maybe he can. He hasn’t quite figured out the rules of this yet.

“If it had mattered you wouldn’t be here.”

There’s a pause, James’s hands running up and down his back. “It mattered,” he says. “It mattered to me.”

Regulus is sobbing. He doesn’t care. He doesn’t care anymore. He isn’t even real. He isn’t even him. He can cry.

“Regulus,” James says softly.

“I don’t want you to be dead,” his words thick, spoken into James’s chest. He isn’t sure why it still hurts so much. “Fuck I don’t want you to be dead.”

“Yeah well, I’m not particularly thrilled about you being here either,” and then; “You promised Reg.”

That feels like a sucker punch, and Regulus actually has to pull back. Recovering from the hit. Finding James’s eyes.

James Potter. Looking at him.

Looking.

Looking.

Looking.

It never stops feeling monumental.

“I meant it,” Regulus finally manages. “I meant to come back. I swear I did.”

Those words drift between them for a moment, setting down roots, growing vines that sneak up their legs, that slip between their ribs. James’s hand slides up Regulus’s neck, cupping his face.

“I love you.”

I love you.

I love you.

Regulus’s whole body reacts, quivering under the impact. Eyes fluttering closed.

“Je t’aime.”

Since I was eleven.

James’s lips press against his.

And he isn’t even real.

Isn’t even here.

Isn’t even him.

But oh how he feels. Warmth filling him up, breaking him open, pulling him apart. It’s too much. Too much. And not nearly enough. Everything that’s been keeping him in falls away. Regulus is boundless, intertwining with James, the pair of them nothing but ash. Nothing but dust. Nothing but love.

Love.

Love.

The garden disappears.

“Hello?”

Lily steps into her childhood home, all the windows thrown wide open, curtains fluttering in the warm breeze. It’s too bright to be able to see anything outside but white light. She pushes cautiously further into the house, vaguely aware of the distant sound of music.

“Hello?”

Two little girls run down the stairs and nearly bowl her over, laughing and giggling, their hair whipping behind them like capes. Lily tries to keep up with them but loses them down the

corridor. The music growing louder.

Haven't felt like this, my dear

Since can't remember when

It's been a long, long time

Light slips through the cracks in the floors and the walls, leaking in like water. It makes everything sparkle and glow, Lily cutting through the beams as she makes her way into the kitchen and startles to a stop.

Her mum has her head tilted back, laughing as her dad twirls them around the room. The sun makes them look almost golden. She watches, letting the music swell, filling her up. They look young, her parents. Or maybe they just look happy.

Every few seconds, out of the corner of her eye, she swears she sees the two girls again. Giggling. Chasing one another. But as soon as she turns her head they're gone.

"Hello bug."

Lily's attention snaps back to her parents, they've stopped dancing, their gazes finally finding her.

She tries to speak, but when she opens her mouth nothing manages to come out. All her words failing her. There might be tears on her cheeks, she can't tell.

"Oh, darling."

The next second they're on either side of her, holding, hugging, kissing her temple, the top of her head.

"I've missed you so much," her voice a wreck.

"We've missed you too."

"It's alright. It's alright."

They fall into one another.

Swallowed by the light.

Regulus grips the broom tightly in his hands—doesn't know where it came from, where he came from, doesn't know where he is, but it hardly matters. He speeds through the air a little recklessly.

He's always loved going fast.

The wind whips the hair out of his face as he drops towards the ground, falling, falling, falling. And then, at the last second, pulling up.

A laugh tumbles out of his mouth before he can help it, his whole body singing. Which is why it takes a moment for him to realize that someone else is laughing too. And clapping. He looks down and finds his father beaming up at him. Orion's dark hair tied in a ponytail at the back of his head, his eyes twinkling as they follow Regulus's descent to the ground.

"Papa," he stumbles off his broom and towards a man he hasn't seen in years—strong and tall, his cheeks full, towering above Regulus.

"That was spectacular, mon chou. You are an artiste huh? An artist in the sky."

Regulus only shakes his head. "You're here."

"Oui, pour toi. Je veux te voir voler. Rien ne m'apporte plus de joie que de te voir dans le ciel, mon chéri."

His father reaches out for him, large hands gently holding either side of Regulus's face, his eyes wet. "I'm sorry I didn't visit," Regulus says in a small voice. "I didn't know how."

Orion only smiles, leaning down and kissing his forehead. "Plus de regrets, d'accord? Pas ici."

Regulus nods, swallowing. "Not here," he whispers in agreement, closing his eyes.

Lily laughs as James tickles her sides, the pair rolling around in the fourposter bed, curtains drawn, the only light coming from their lit wands that they've already lost somewhere in the sheets.

"Stop it! Stop!" Lily giggles, shoving and pushing at him. James must have thrown his glasses off at some point because he isn't wearing them now, hair a mess as he grins down at her.

"Or what?" he asks, voice husky. "What're you gonna do Evans?"

Lily smirks, their heavy breathing loud in the small space. "Wouldn't you like to know?"

James's eyes dip down to her mouth a second before he takes it. And Lily opens for him, lets him in, swallows the groan that punches out of him when she arches her back.

"You remembered the silencing charm right?" James breathes against her lips.

"I thought you were casting it?"

"No I—" James's eyes go wide, darting to the curtains. "Shit."

Lily only laughs, and in one swift motion flips them over.

“Oof,” James lets out as he lands on his back, Lily straddling his hips, running her hands along his arms and pinning them above his head.

“Well then,” she whispers, dropping her face down so that their noses nearly touch. “Guess you’ll just have to be quiet.”

“How did I not know you snogged Gilderoy?” Marlene asks through a mouthful of crisps. She’s lying on her back on the floor of the girl’s dormitory, Dorcas leaning against the bed beside her, Lily on top of it. Everything is a little fuzzy. A little soft. Like they’re watching an old movie.

“It wasn’t really a snog,” Dorcas rolls her eyes. “More like...”

“A peck?” Lily offers helpfully.

Dorcas scrunches up her face. “More than a peck.”

“You snogged him! Just admit it!”

Dorcas kicks Marlene who throws her crisps at her in retaliation, Lily laughing at them from above.

“It was just a kiss that’s all,” Dorcas says in a huff.

Marlene rolls her eyes. “Uh-huh.”

“Shut-it McKinnon.”

Marlene looks up at her, watches the way she bites her lip, trying to hold back a smile. Jutting her chin out defiantly Marlene replies; “Make me Meadowes.”

They lie tangled up together, the Come and Go Room glowing around them. There’s no mirror on the wall, the carvings on full display;

G & S

J & R

More than once James finds Regulus's eyes trailing over to them. Finds his own eyes trailing over to them. James lifts Regulus's hand to his mouth, kissing each of his fingertips, his knuckles, enjoying watching Regulus fight back a smile.

"You reckon anyone will ever find them?" he nods towards the initials.

Regulus looks at them thoughtfully, letting James turn over his hand, kissing his wrist, the spot where his pulse would be.

"Yes," he says finally. "We did, after all."

James hums against his skin. "Big gap between us and them," he still can't quite believe it was really Salazar and Godric who had this room before them.

"In another hundred years then," Regulus says. "There will be another pair of idiots."

"Speak for yourself, I'm well clever."

Regulus snorts despite his best efforts not to, putting his hand in James's face and shoving him away. "You're insufferable is what you are."

James grabs hold of Regulus's wrist yanking him on top of him. Chest to chest, nose to nose. Regulus holds himself up on his elbows, James staring at him. "You suffer me just fine," the older boy says finally. Quietly.

And Regulus can't help it, he kisses him. The corner of his mouth, the hinge of his jaw, the side of his neck. James holding still and letting him.

Regulus isn't surprised it took so long for this room to be found again.

It takes centuries to grow this kind of love.

The dining table in the Potter's cottage is covered in food and surrounded by people, music playing in the background. Lily Evans, Dorcas Meadowes and Marlene McKinnion all crowd around one corner, laughing and shouting. James sits beside Lily, his father across from him, Gideon and Fabian Prewett at the other end arguing over the bread rolls. There's an older couple too, a man and a woman, the woman baring a striking resemblance to Evans, almost certainly her mother.

Regulus stands at the back door, on the threshold, watching. Unable to make himself move. To shake the feeling that he doesn't belong here. James looks so at ease, so happy, sitting with the people he loves—Regulus doesn't want to ruin it. The truth is, the pair of them were always better in the dark. Meant for secret rooms and cupboards and hideaways. They could never stand-up to the scrutiny of the light of day.

“Are you waiting for an invitation?”

Regulus starts, turning to find a smirking Euphemia Potter leaning against the wall by the door. He opens his mouth but doesn't quite know what to say, something painful rocking through him.

“Because you can have one,” she gestures towards the table when he doesn't speak. “He's been waiting for you.”

Regulus's eyes go automatically to James who has just snatched something off of Lily Evan's plate, earning him a smack to the arm. Regulus stares, likely for too long, before looking back at Euphemia.

“Do you know?” he whispers, throat tight.

She tilts her head, eyes going soft. “I'm afraid there are many answers to that question.”

Regulus nods, because she's right, and because it gives him a little more time before he has to speak again. “What I did,” which probably isn't more helpful. He forces himself to look at her, somehow hold her gaze. “What I did to you?”

“Ah,” she says knowingly. For a second neither of them speak and then: “You're quite talented, you know. It takes great skill to brew a potion that can get past Fleamont Potter.”

Regulus hisses like he's just been burned, taking a step back. “I shouldn't be here.”

Euphemia looks at him, eyes far too much like her son's for Regulus's comfort. “Do you want to be here?” she asks finally.

Another gut punch. “Yes,” it's his dirty secret—wanting—he's supposed to know better than that.

“Well then,” she offers her hand to Regulus who's so startled by the gesture that he actually takes it. “C'mon,” she gives him a light tug but Regulus doesn't move.

“How can you—“ that's all he manages to work into his mouth. Euphemia giving his hand a squeeze. Maybe she's a mindreader because she seems to know exactly what he means.

“I'm not in the habit of blaming children for the actions of adults.”

But Regulus doesn't accept that, shaking his head. “I was eighteen.”

Euphemia smiles sadly at him. “I know, you'd barely started,” she looks over at the table. “None of you got much of a chance at all.” For a moment the sadness on her face truly breaks his heart, but then she shakes it off, expression lighter when she turns back to him.

“You have a choice, to come in or to stay out. To face it or to runaway. You said you wanted to be here?”

“I do,” Regulus says before he can stop himself.

Smiling slightly she leans forward, still holding his hand. “Then be brave Regulus Black. And come inside.”

Which is how Regulus finds himself being lead through the Potter’s dining room, finds himself sitting on James’s other side, at a table full of people he knows he’s wronged. He wants to run away. To hide. To pluck those memories out of him one by one. But he doesn’t, and when James smiles at him it’s almost worth it.

“Hi.”

“Hi.”

James’s leg knocks against his under the table.

“I’m so happy you’re finally here.”

Regulus swallows. “Yeah,” he manages. “Yeah me too.”

Memories, and feelings, and thoughts, bumping into one another, struggling to find the light. To stay there. They crumble and rebuild, blurring the lines between one another. The past, the present, the hundreds of futures never touched, never given life, all thrumming through them. Alive. At once. And separately. And all of the time.

The sun and the stars and the storm.

Orbiting around one another.

Above. Below. Watching.

“It’s sad,” a voice in the void, “that we will never grow old together.”

In and out of one another, leaving traces behind.

“But can’t you see it? Don’t you know?”

Warmth that bleeds into every corner of the universe.

“That oh from us, so much will grow.”

Chapter End Notes

** Yes, for you. I want to see you fly. Nothing brings me more joy than to see you in the sky, my darling

** No more regrets, okay? Not here.

Thank you <3

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